

ESTONIAN

LITERARY

MAGAZINE

SPRING **2024**



157
The final issue
N057

ELM

ESTONIAN
LITERARY
MAGAZINE

elm.estinst.ee

Spring 2024

N^o 57

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*The current issue of ELM was supported
by Cultural Endowment of Estonia*

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ISSN 1406-0345

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Estonian Literary Magazine is included in the
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ELM

ESTONIAN
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Dear reader!

You are holding the final issue of the Estonian Literary Magazine to be published by the Estonian Institute. I wish I did not have to write that sentence, but that is unfortunately the case. Although society as a whole suffers in times of crisis, the cultural sector always feels it first and most painfully.

This compels us to look both backwards and forwards in time.

As the restoration of Estonia's independence drew closer to fruition in the late 1980s, there came a need to establish international ties, and on October 4, 1988, the Estonian Institute was founded. According to the plan drafted by Estonia's first post-occupation president, Lennart Meri, the Institute would nurture lasting foreign relationships with cultural and educational institutions and acquaint the country with the world abroad. Although the Institute didn't receive permission to operate until April 1989, work was already well underway thanks to volunteers and support from Estonia's friends. The motto became: "Every beginning is easy!"

This is the Estonian Institute's 35th year of operating as a nonprofit organization. Is enduring easy? Just as much as beginning, no doubt.

First appearing in 1995, Estonian Literary Magazine was the Institute's longest-running publication. What has the biannual English-language periodical's role and significance been over the last 29 years? Piret Viires, who served on its advisory board from the very beginning, writes: "[...] ELM endeavored to give readers new to Estonian literature a general historical background while simultaneously focusing on fresh authors and the aspects that make up the fabric of the contemporary scene in all its motley brilliance."

"This continued in every issue that went to press. Estonian literature changed and developed over those years, and its most thrilling authors and trends all found their way into the publication. Flipping through the 57 issues, one understands its manner of development from the perspective of ELM's editors, who sought phenomena that would pique the interest of non-Estonian readers while still

conveying active literary trends.” In this final issue, literary scholar Rein Veidemann gives a brief and colorful overview of Estonian literature, focusing on the last thirty years. Veidemann’s view of literature is broader and he uses a metaphor from theater: “[...] the revolving stage, which allows quick, smooth transitions between scenes and characters, is a particularly vivid symbol of contemporary Estonian literature if you compare the early decades of the 21st century to its earlier development.” He notes that although the number of organized writers in Estonia is at an all-time high, the country’s literature is growing more niche in terms of both genre and audience. “Amidst the revolving stage’s kaleidoscopic diversity, the creation and preservation of identity through fundamental codes—something that was regarded as literary culture’s primary function—is losing its meaning.”

And what will the future bring? Young author Reijo Roos doesn’t believe that AI and the metaverse will alter the writing process: “There will always be a writer who wants to say something and a reader who will listen. So, it has been for generations and is unlikely to change in the next fifty years. Some topics might be more prominent over the coming decades (i.e. climate, equal rights, artificial intelligence, and globalization). Still, in the end, people are fascinated most by other people’s thoughts and emotions.”

Yes, people! Magazines aren’t made without people, either. From beginning to end, ELM’s editors were Krista Kaer, Piret Viires, Janika Kronberg,

Rutt Hinrikus, Tiina Randviir, Jan Kaus, Berit Kaschan, and Annika A. Koppel.

I’d like to thank ELM’s current advisory board, translator Adam Cullen, copyeditor Robyn Laider, and designers Piia Ruber and Andres Tali—it was wonderful making this magazine with you! My thanks also go out to the authors, as their contributions truly defined the publication. I greatly enjoyed editing ELM, particularly because almost no one I approached declined to write a piece—only a couple of authors were genuinely short on time.

To borrow the revolving-stage metaphor as well, I’ve no doubt that a new publication will appear and take the place of our former guide through Estonian literature, albeit with a different title and format. It’s simply how things must be, as we need these guides more than ever to navigate the kaleidoscopic stage spinning on the metaverse’s threshold.

ANNIKA A. KOPPEL /
photo Peeter Langovits



We Need Guides in the World of Books and Literature

by Krista Kaer

When *Estonian Literary Magazine* was first published in 1995, it was our conviction that the whole world wanted to find out how fascinating Estonian literature truly is. The new publication was meant to give other nations a sense of Estonian literature, and interest came quickly.

During the Soviet occupation, literature helped Estonians endure and keep hope alive with often-hidden messages. Literature was certainly more vital to us than it was to Western societies, though not many Estonian works had been translated, and not many people outside of Estonia really knew what to expect. So, it was natural to undertake what was a new magazine in cooperation with the Estonian Institute and the Estonian Writers' Union, as the former was founded to forge cultural ties just like those foreseen by the project. In turn, the West wanted to learn more about national literature that had hitherto been hidden behind the Iron Curtain. Although some Estonian writing had trickled through, foreign publishers, translators, and Estophiles alike rushed to contact the Estonian Institute and the Estonian Writers' Union, sensing new discoveries. ELM set out to cover earlier and forthcoming books, publish essays and interviews and endeavor to answer the world's questions to at least some degree.

ELM was published for twenty nine consecutive years, and global interest has only risen. Smaller national cultures and literatures attract more attention than ever before, foreign publishers seek counterweights to larger cultures' homogenizing effects, and translation has also flourished. Estonian writers are in demand among foreign publishers and literary festivals. Although much has changed since ELM's early days, its fundamental task has remained the same: to provide information about Estonian literature to anyone interested. Literature itself has also changed over nearly three decades, assuming a role in Estonian society similar to the one it had prior to occupation and still has in Western countries today. Contemporary Estonian literature is diverse, covering almost every practiced genre. The pool of active writers is growing briskly, and it sometimes seems like even more is written than read. A similar trend can be discerned worldwide, making it extraordinarily difficult to stand out. Therefore, providing a wide range of attractively presented information is crucial, including longer pieces on major and up-and-coming authors, interviews, and summaries of new Estonian books.

The HeadRead literary festival is marking its fifteenth year. For a decade and a half, the festival has been a platform for foreign writers to share a

stage with local ones. We've also hosted publishers from several countries in cooperation with the Estonian Literature Center. Foreign guests can discuss their own writing and works while also observing Estonia's literary scene, and the *Estonian Literary Magazine* has been a crucial tool in introducing them to Estonian literature. It's often enough for a simple name or intriguing review to stick in their minds and grow into a pearl of further interest.

The Estonian Publishers' Union attends large international book fairs with a stand displaying Estonian literature and publications, of which the *Estonian Literary Magazine* has again been one of the most prominent and valuable assets throughout the years. Most other countries put out similar periodicals with varying structures: some comprising sweeping overviews and reviews, others focusing solely on new books. ELM united both approaches, and I hope that thanks to these book fairs, it has also traveled to almost every corner of the world.

ELM neatly accomplished its goal of introducing Estonian literature abroad while undergoing very few necessary tweaks over the decades. One can debate whether paper periodicals are still relevant in this digital day and age, but so long as paper books are being published, people will likely wish to read about them and their authors on paper, too.

Now, one era of acquiring Estonian literature abroad has come to an end. Although the way we communicate Estonian literature will change, the communication itself certainly won't cease. The world is filled with literature and books, and for many long years, *Estonian Literary Magazine* was a capable guide to navigating at least a tiny corner of it.

Krista Kaer (b. 1951) is an Estonian editor and translator whose most widely read translation into Estonian is the Harry Potter series (together with her daughter Kaisa Kaer). Kaer has been the editor-in-chief of the publishing house Varrak and an organizer of the HeadRead literary festival since 1995. She was also the first editor of *Estonian Literary Magazine*.

KRISTA KAER /
photo Dmitri Kotjuh



Estonian Literary Magazine: A Window into Estonian Literature

by Piret Viires

Estonian Literary Magazine was first published in 1995 and has served as a window into Estonia for those who do not speak Estonian but wish to acquaint themselves with its world and its literary scene. For nearly 30 years, ELM kept a watchful eye on developments in Estonian literature, carefully selecting authors and texts for translation and introduction and striving to convey important contemporary developments. Thus, ELM's history is simultaneously a history of Estonian literature's path out into the world.

Of course, Estonian literature in 2024 is no longer what it was in the mid-90s when ELM began. Nevertheless, one can say that contemporary literature's main trends were set in place during those early years. ELM was born amidst rapid changes and in a decade that Estonian sociologist and politician Marju Lauristin called our “return to the Western world”¹. Just as Estonian society turned its gaze to the West and strove to regain its rightful place among the countries of Europe, so did Estonian literature seek outlets and readers outside of its own linguistic space and former Soviet territories.

The world revealed by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of Eastern Europe excited Western Europe in the 90s. History was being born right before our eyes and readers wanted to find out more. The first issues of ELM, which appeared in newspaper format, tried to capture this transformational moment and convey it to the English-language reader.

In ELM's 50th issue, Estonian publisher and translator Krista Kaer recalled that era of opening and changes: “Foreign publishers sensed new opportunities—yet-undiscovered masterpieces could be hiding somewhere in the Baltic states, or authors there might presently be writing books that struck to the heart of that turbulent zeitgeist!”²

One of the aims behind ELM was to inform foreign publishers of what was new and exciting in Estonian literature. Of course, its mission was broader: to introduce Estonian literature to an audience of literary enthusiasts around the world. ELM was distributed through Estonian embassies, sent to foreign libraries, and found its way to the mailboxes of loyal and dedicated subscribers.

ELM also became crucial in teaching Estonian literature to non-Estonian

¹ Marju Lauristin et al. (editors), *Return to the Western World: Cultural and Political Perspectives on the Estonian Post-Communist Transition*, Tartu: Tartu University Press, 1997

² Krista Kaer, “A Path a Quarter-Century Long”. *Estonian Literary Magazine* 2020, No. 1, p. 2

Estonian Literary Magazine

Autumn 1995

Published and distributed by The Estonian Institute and KOGE Publishing House Ltd.

Estonian
Literature in
times old and
new

Translation as
part of national
literature

The
Phenomenon
of ethno-literature
in contemporary
Estonian
literature

Book illustrations
by Reii Sabo

Estonian
Literature in
translation
1990-1995

Estonian Prose
and Poetry by
Jaak Kopinski
Karl Lill
Jaan Kross
Matti Kuit
Karl Tode



ALL SOULS NIGHT by KAARL TODE

We know who we are when we go. We go as men and as women, as little child
people, we go from beds and from beds, from behind the plough and from the boat as
gripping a sword with pain and with joy with sorrow and with excitement, with and without
But these sword only be going, there must also be coming. We shall go, but we do
not really know who we shall be then — ourselves, perhaps, babies from the womb,
invisible, insensible, bodiless like wind, like a thought or a dream. But no matter how we
and him, we shall come back and stay with you. We shall become you, you will become

Elm

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estonian literary magazine

2014



Estonian Literary Magazine

Spring 2016



ESTONIAN LITERARY MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2023



N° 56

students. For more than a dozen years, I've taught Estonian literature in English at Tallinn University to students from an array of countries, extending from Japan and the US to India and Germany. ELM has been a fantastic tool thanks to its translated excerpts, lengthy articles, interviews, and summaries of new Estonian fiction, poetry, and children's literature. The magazine helped university students stay informed about the Estonian literary scene.

ELM's early issues reveal what was important in Estonian literature at the time and what was believed to be of interest beyond the newly reestablished national borders. It's noteworthy that the first issue also contained a translation of Kristjan Jaak Peterson's prophetic 1818 poem "The Moon": "Cannot then the tongue of this land / on the winds of song / raised to the heavens / reach its own eternity?" (translated by Eric Dickens). The poem has long been a symbol of the Estonian language's vitality, and its inclusion in ELM's very first issue was intended to show that the Estonian language and literature possess an even greater might, that both the language and literature could spread throughout the world through translations.

ELM's first issues contained essential overviews of Estonian literary history composed by Mati Sirkel and Hasso Krull and reviews of poetry, children's literature, and drama. Estonia's most-translated work in the 1990s was *Border State* by Emil Tode (Tõnu Õnnepalu), so it comes as no surprise that the very first ELM contained both a synopsis and an excerpt of the novel, the magazine also covered Õnnepalu's later books regularly.

Looking through ELM's early years, it's clear that many central authors and phenomena of the 90s literary trans-

formation were immediately conveyed to readers. Articles were published on ethno-futurism, (:) Kivisildnik's unconventional poetry, Jüri Ehvest's novels, and Peeter Sauter's writing. Biographies and translations of already-established authors were also included: Hando Runnel, Jaan Kaplinski, Andres Ehin, and Juhan Viiding, to name a few. Space was naturally left for bygone years with articles on the earliest days of Estonian writing and classics such as Juhan Liiv, Oskar Luts, and A. H. Tammsaare.

In this way, ELM endeavored to give readers new to Estonian literature a general historical background while simultaneously focusing on fresh authors and the aspects that make up the fabric of the contemporary scene in all its motley brilliance.

This continued in every issue that went to press. Estonian literature changed and developed over those years, and its most thrilling authors and trends all found their way into the publication. Flipping through the 57 issues, one understands its manner of development from the perspective of ELM's editors, who sought phenomena that would pique the interest of non-Estonian readers while still conveying active literary trends.

ELM maintained a practical and professional view of Estonian literature. Its editors, advisory board, and authors were trustworthy. ELM helped Estonian literature find its way into the world. This journey was supported by the Estonian Literature Center since 2001 and, since 2000, the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's *Traducta* Program, which provides funding for translating and publishing Estonian literature in other languages. Thanks to this professional diversity and cooperation between multiple institutions, Estonian literature is

better known worldwide than ever, with increased annual translation figures and the heightened visibility of Estonian authors on the international stage.

The *Estonian Literary Magazine* was crucial in making Estonian literature visible far afield from Estonia. We will never know all the individual instances, though it's possible that after a quick browse at an Estonian embassy somewhere, a guest may have headed straight to a library the following day to borrow a translated work of Jaan Kross, Tõnu Õnnepalu or Andrus Kivirähk. An Erasmus student in Tallinn may discover the poetry of Elo Viiding or Tõnis Vilu in a copy of ELM and be so moved that they buy Estonian books and begin to explore the mysterious and unfamiliar language. Perhaps they will one day become a translator of Estonian literature themselves.

Thus, the *Estonian Literary Magazine* has been an essential window into that world for those looking through it with purpose and interest and for those who casually glance at its pages. Although this window is now closing, it will hopefully reopen in another form so that Estonian literature's global journey may continue just as successfully as it has.

Piret Viires (b. 1963) is a literary scholar and professor of Estonian literature and literary theory at Tallinn University. Together with Krista Kaer, she edited the first issue of Estonian Literary Magazine and has been a member of its advisory board since its beginning. Viires is also the vice-chair of the Estonian Writers' Union and a board member of the Estonian Literary Center.

PIRET VIIRES /

photo Krõöt Tarkmeel



Doris Kareva: The Best Book Has Little Text and Many Thoughts

by Katja Novak

You could say Doris Kareva (b. 1958) is one of Estonia's most renowned female poets and has published nearly twenty poetry collections, though to do so omits the fantastic detail of her writing; you could say Doris is a well-known translator, though this doesn't tell us about the incredible skill of her translations; you could say Doris is a conceptual author who has written texts used by many Estonian composers, but this doesn't convey the beauty of what those pieces sound like. All one can do is begin reading Kareva's works and develop a conception of her universe.

Kareva's universe is a multidimensional mosaic in which every piece is fit together with care. To attempt to outline her life, I'd point out the poet's graduation from the University of Tartu *cum laude*, her long term as the Secretary General of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO, her work as an editor of the cultural weekly *Sirp*, and the literary journal *Looming* (still to this day), her two cultural prizes awarded by the Republic of Estonia, and her nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Not to mention

her innumerable translations into Estonian and her original poetry into Latvian, Finnish, German, French, Italian, English, and many other languages. In addition, Kareva mentors young writers, translators, and other creative individuals who haven't decided if they should lean more toward translation or poetry. As well as her collaborations with the Estonian composers Pärt Uusberg, Tõnu Kõrvits, Olav Ehala, Rasmus Puur, and others. Several of Kareva's poems have been adapted and sung by hundreds of thousands at the Estonian Song and Dance Festival.

This interview focuses on the beginning of Kareva's creative path. How anyone discovers that path for themselves is always a mystery. Some do later in life or fail to find it at all, while for others, it begins with their very first steps.

How would you define yourself first?

I suppose I've mostly said poet, translator, and editor in that order, as that's how they came into my life. When I was foremost a poet, then I didn't yet know how to edit, and now that I believe I'm getting better and better as an editor, writing poetry has become a luxury.

DORIS KAREVA in 1982 /
photo Margus Haavamägi/
National Archive



What was the first attempt you made at writing?

I started writing things when I was four, though I can't remember the very beginning exactly. All kinds of thoughts can cross your mind, and my parents wrote some down. My mother worked at the Estonian National Library, where they had a tradition of displaying children's creative works every New Year's. Mine was always a handwritten poem. Every December, heart pounding in my chest, I'd pick out the best poem I'd written that year and read it aloud. Curiously, the display was filled with drawings and all kinds of interesting crafts, but no one else thought to write poems.

What were the first poems you published?

My very first published poem appeared in our school almanac, *Trükitähed* (Letters), when I was eight: "Far from the roads, deep in

the woods / there's a little cottage. / Even a mossy well in the yard, missing only a master. / Early every dawn / no crowing can be heard. / Silence falls over the yard, the house, / not even a mouse in sight ..." and so forth. Looking back, I realize that adults read it in a completely different way, but at the time, I simply had this vision without any sort of underlying meaning and with the strange, unsettling feeling that came with it. I couldn't cope with that feeling, so I wrote it down. And that's the first that was published.

As a teenager, I attended a writing/theater club, and our instructor wanted to stage *The Little Prince*. As she could tell that many of us dabbled in writing, she told us to bring our notebooks to the meeting, and maybe the prince's story could be interwoven with our poems. That's just what we did, and we all exchanged notebooks. But somehow, the notebook containing my poems ended up in the hands of Arvi Siig, the editor of the youth magazine *Noorus* at the time.

Arvi invited me to his office. I can still vividly recall that when he stood at his desk and leaned forward to shake my hand, it felt like he filled the whole room. I felt tiny in that little nook, marveling at how tall he was, arcing over the ceiling. The first selection of my poems was published in *Noorus* when I was 14.

To whom did you first show your poems?**A literature teacher?**

My literature teacher often dismissed me from class—to work on the school billboard, for example. But it might have been around eighth or ninth grade when I realized I couldn't pick out which of my poems

DORIS KAREVA / photo author unknown





DORIS KAREVA, writing a graduation letter in 1977 / photo National Archive

were better or worse. I then came up with a very clever device, by my own way of thinking. I entrusted my notebook to my closest friends and asked them to make checkmarks next to the poems they liked best. I couldn't wait to find out which were good and which weren't. But no! It turned out the anonymous checkmarks were distributed quite evenly throughout the notebook. The experiment wasn't a failure, of course, because I learned a thing or two about my friends, thanks to that.

If you hadn't picked literature, then what would you have chosen?

I haven't picked anything. I remember that in tenth grade, we were given a career-suitability test with many interesting questions—the kind where you can't guess what your response might lead to. So, I answered in complete honesty. Believe it or not, I recently came across that old test

half a century later. “Writer,” “philosopher,” and “journalist” were more or less even matches. Then came a bit of blank space before “biologist.”

My literature teacher told me that if you have a good idea in the middle of the night but can't be bothered to get up and jot down a couple of lines, then you're not a true poet and can sleep on in peace. Do you ever get up in the middle of the night and write down a good idea?

That's exactly right. I remember Juhan Viiding¹ also said that the only difference between a poet and a non-poet is that the poet will get up in the middle of the night and write down lines they've thought of. A non-poet won't be bothered. I usually get up. You can never have too many special ideas and shouldn't let them go to waste.

¹ Juhan Viiding (1948–1995): an Estonian poet, actor, and director.

What was the first text that made you want to start translating?

My first experience was thanks to my English literature teacher, who assigned us to translate Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Some students were bothered by such a difficult task, but I was enthralled. I remember staying up all night to translate Frost's poem, trying it one way and another, and that was the moment the kitten's nose was poked into the milk, so to say. A few years later, I discovered Anna Akhmatova's poems—enchanting gestures, pauses, and gazes that somehow beckoned to be mimicked.

When *Sirp* organized a poetry translation contest, I submitted my attempts and shared first place with Kalju Kangur. That gave me a little courage to continue.

The next important author I discovered in the early 1980s was Emily Dickinson. It had been an especially difficult

year with the deaths of several people close to me. I felt I hadn't the patience to read contemporary literature; it all seemed so superficial. But when I happened to come across Dickinson (who wasn't well known in Estonia), I knew I wanted to try to put her words into Estonian. I healed through translation, in a way. It was true therapy. It helped me process my grief.

What is the best book format, in your opinion?

Nothing very big and nothing with entirely soft covers; they just need to be slightly flexible. It should be comfortable to hold and stick into a bag or a pocket to take on a plane. It's undoubtedly a familiar topic to anyone who gets mildly panicked whenever they don't have anything to read because you have to get your daily dose of art somehow. A compact book that has little text but many thoughts—yes, that's the best type of book for me.

DORIS KAREVA / photo Kaido Vainomaa

**If bookworms are wanderers in a sense, then what are they seeking?**

I believe all bookworms are wanderers, and as the song goes, "each seeks their own." They're looking for their own world, their own reality, its reflection in different keys—in other words, for recognition in forms they haven't realized yet. Reading is endless development—a way to foster understanding, sympathy, and communion in every initially unimagined direction. And that doesn't only apply to literature, but to art as a whole.

Katja Novak (b. 1998) is a Ukrainian poet and translator, including Kareva's poetry, who resides in Estonia.

Soarsong

by Doris Kareva

Swallow, oh, swallow, save this day!

Smart tailor of skies,
sharp-winged one,
tail like scissors,
beak needlelike,
song a sudden seam and sew, see!
mending a torn heart.

Swallow, oh swallow, save this day!

Sifting existence,
stitch what is threadbare
with tender power,
mend what is flawed
fluttering flapping
far in the firmament.

Swallow, oh, swallow, your song is a prayer:
spring, cleanse,
smoke, reconcile,
so spirit will wave
without a stain
from ancient grove to grove.

Swallow, oh, swallow, swift spirited
smart tailor of the skies,
sharp-winged one –
mend the world with song's silken thread,
with saliva, with feather, fix the heart's nest,
fasten, repeat.
Fix, fasten, repeat,
fix, fasten, repeat.

Swallow, oh, swallow, save this day!

Translated by Adam Cullen

A Revolving Stage: Notes on the Contemporary Estonian Literary Field

by Rein Veidemann

The revolving-stage concept, first used in a Munich theater in the late 19th century, can certainly be a metaphor to describe the 21st-century Estonian literary field. By “literary field”, I mean the network of ties that connect authors, publishers, books, readers, and literature’s status in society.

I’ll attempt to elaborate on the revolving-stage metaphor. One immediate justification for its application is the outstanding importance of theater in Estonian culture, starting from the 1870s when the romantic nationalist poet and journalist Lydia Koidula (1843–1886) laid the foundations with the Vanemuine singing and acting society and ending with the nearly 20 professional theaters and dozens of project-based theaters active in Estonia today. In summer, it’s hard to find an Estonian city, town, or other suitable rural landscape without a play or musical being performed. As Estonian theaters put on nearly 7,000 performances attended by close to 1.2 million people in 2022 alone (for comparison, Estonia’s current population is 1.3 million), there’s not a shred of doubt that out of the cultural “trinity” which can be used to describe Estonian preferences—literature, choral singing, and theater—the latter is the most prominent.

Thus, the revolving stage, which allows quick, smooth transitions between scenes and characters, is a particularly vivid symbol of contemporary Estonian literature if you compare the early decades of the 21st century to its earlier development. The process has been a sporadic sequence of revolutions that have begun with manifestos, clearly definable generational transitions, aesthetic or political ideologies, interruptions, and rebirths. Hasso Krull (b. 1964), one of today’s most renowned Estonian poets and philosophers, has described Estonian culture as one of interruption and its literature as a conglomerate of multiple sub-literatures. Tiit Hennoste (b. 1953), another authoritative linguist and literary academic, has described Estonian literature’s hectic 20th-century course as “a leap towards modernity”. He has also controversially called the “Europeanization” of Estonian literature a mark of self-colonization.

Here, I will list the most significant ruptures of 20th-century Estonian literature and their central authors, now regarded as classics. The century began with the establishment of the Young Estonia literary group in 1905. Guided by poet Gustav Suits’s (1883–1956) slogan, “Let us be Estonians but become Europeans”, the movement was a true tour de force that transformed not only our

Rein Veidemann at
the Lydia Koidula Museum
in Pärnu, 2023 / photo
Marten Martšenkov

IN-NI-MEN-



notion of elite culture and aesthetics in literature, language use, and visual art, but put it into practice in the form of albums, journals, public performances, and publishing.

One illustrative example includes the activities of Johannes Aavik (1880–1973)—a future linguist, critic, and translator called a “linguistic revolutionary”. For Aavik, the expressiveness of the Estonian language wasn’t merely a question of literature but Estonian culture as a whole. Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971), who founded the Estonian Writers’ Union (1922) and its literary magazine *Looming* (1923), was another main Estonian literary ideologist. Tuglas was responsible for starting the genres of Estonian short stories and literary

essays. The Siuru literary group continued the early-century *Sturm und Drang*¹ practiced earlier in several genres by Juhan Liiv (1864–1913), an existentialist patriotic poet, and Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), Estonia’s first professional writer – with volcanic performances. Siuru endowed Estonian literature with an immortal icon in the form of the poet Marie Under (1883–1980), though Henrik Visnapuu (1890–1952) also shaped the language’s poetic directions.

The novels by Anton H. Tammsaare (1878–1940), who began writing in the days of Young Estonia, achieved monumental status in the 1920s and 30s, especially due to his *Truth and Justice* pentalogy (1926–1933). Prose’s victory march justifies labelling that decade as the first epic era of Estonian literature. By the end of the period, a generation educated in the independent Republic of Estonia had come of age with the literary scholar and translator Ants Oras (1900–1982) at its forefront. His poetry anthology *Arbujad* (1936) lent its name to a creative group that focused on uncompromising intellectualism and sprouted into an entire galaxy of future literary classics such as Betti Alver (1906–1989), Heiti Talvik (1904–1947), Kersti Merilaas (1913–1986), and August Sang (1914–1969).

Estonia’s occupation by the Soviet Russian regime in 1940 split the already mighty tree of Estonian literature. Most of the works written between 1920–1940 were locked away in the cellars of special archives and many writers who remained in Estonia faced a similar fate

REIN VEIDEMANN

101 Eesti kirjandusteost

101 Estonian Literary Works

Varrak, 2011, 224 pp.

ISBN 9789985322802



¹ A literary and artistic movement in Germany in the late 18th century, influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and characterized by the expression of emotional unrest and a rejection of neoclassical literary norms.

of imprisonment or deportation to Siberia. Estonians who escaped to the West as refugees organized a diaspora literary scene in the 1950s and 60s, the leading figures of which were Bernard Kangro (1910–1994), Kalju Lepik (1931–2017), and Karl Ristikivi (1912–1977). The most latter of which was seen as Tammsaare's successor with novels he wrote in the late 1930s. For several decades, Estonian literature written in the West and within the Soviet empire became the most important platform for resistance.

The next literary breakthrough took place in the 1960s, driven by the free-verse poetry and broadened horizons of Jaan Kross (1920–2007), Ain Kaalep (1926–2020), and Ellen Niit (1928–2016).

A “cassette generation” followed from 1962–1967: poets who made their debuts with booklets packed together in small cardboard boxes. Iconic authors from this period who enriched Estonia's literary modernism and discovered new passages include Paul-Eerik Rummo (b. 1942), Hando Runnel (b. 1938), Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021), Mats Traat (1936–2022), Andres Ehin (1940–2011), and Viivi Luik (b. 1946). Two outstanding exceptions from the period were Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966), a linguistic virtuoso who survived the Gulag, and Juhan Viiding (Jüri Üdi, 1948–1995), an outstandingly talented poet and actor.

Noteworthy and prolific prosaists who began their journey in that period include Arvo Valton (b. 1935) and Enn Vetemaa (1936–2017). Viivi Luik, Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021), and Ene Mihkelson (1944–2017) began their careers with poetry but moved on to write influential essays and prose. Mats Traat's 12-part South Estonian family saga *Minge üles mägedele* (*Go Up into the Hills*, 1979–2010) spans the mid-19th to the

mid-20th century and is comparable to Tammsaare's *Truth and Justice*.

Jaan Kross undeniably became Estonia's epic literary landmark during the 1970s. His four-part historical work *Between Three Plagues* (1970–1980), which follows the life of the 16th-century (allegedly) Estonian chronicler and pastor Balthasar Russow (1536–1600), explores a core topic of Estonian literature: the price and collateral paid by a small nation for its existence alongside large nations and states. Kross's autobiographical novel *Treading Air* (1998) also addresses the subject in an artistic and documentary manner. Kross, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature on at least five occasions (especially after his internationally renowned novel *The Czar's Madman* was published in 1978), indeed planted autobiographical elements in all his works, including his “school novel” *The Wikman Boys* (1988), which is set in Kross's alma mater Jakob Westholm Gymnasium. His ethos echoes in the words of Director Wikman: “And I wish to tell you this: we Estonians are so few that every man's goal, or at least the goal of every Wikman boy, must be immortality.”

Estonia's independence was restored on August 20th, 1991. Metaphorically, what marked the beginning of the century was repeated: a “storm and stress” into Europe; accession into European institutions; feverish transition into a market economy and the rapid accumulation of capital; entrepreneurship's injection into the free media, book publishing, and other artistic production. An entertainment industry established itself in the country and most culture became a consumer product. The market share of time-wasting literature and self-help books exploded. The post-modernist view of life and art

blurred the lines between seemingly classical value hierarchies (i.e. literature's role in the creation of national identity) and interpretative templates.

Even so, what appeared to be another accelerating change only ended up affecting culture's outermost surface and the accumulation of all types of artifacts. Märt Väljataga (b. 1965)—one of the most influential 20th- and early-21st-century Estonian literary ideologists and editor-in-chief of the avantgarde journal *Vikerkaar*—stated at the dawn of postmodernism's ascendant decade that “what is termed ‘postmodernism’ only forms through the cooperation of cultural institutions (universities, magazines, critique, etc.)”, yet at the same time, the narratives that bind Estonian society together remain vigorous and do not dissolve into postmodernity itself. The creation of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia in 1994 also contributed greatly to national vitality, smoothing out some of the effects wreaked by market forces in the creative sector. It was shortly after midnight on September 21st of that same year the ferry *Estonia* capsized in one of the greatest disasters to occur on the Baltic Sea. I believe that poet, translator, and professor Jüri Talvet's (b. 1945) poem *Elegy to the Estonia*—written shortly after the catastrophe—serves as a literary counterpoint to the 1990s, reminding us of the frailty of humans and nations even in the greatest state of freedom.

The first two decades of 21st-century Estonian literature have resembled a revolving stage with ever-increasing clarity. New digital platforms and the recent discovery of the possibilities of artificial intelligence are making writing and publishing available to all. Never before has the number of organized writers been so great in Estonia: the Estonian Writers' Union had 336 members by

its centenary in 2022. At the same time, writing is growing more niche in terms of genre and audience, i.e. crime novels, memoirs, science fiction, esoterica, LGBT literature, and the traditional genres. The discussion of nationality or any human grouping is being made increasingly difficult by the fracturing and blurring of the cultural scene as a whole. Amidst the revolving stage's kaleidoscopic diversity, the creation and preservation of identity through fundamental codes—something that was regarded as literary culture's primary function—is losing its meaning.

Recent years have brought extraordinary abundance to the Estonian cultural scene, including the literary field. The full annual list of original works published by the dozens of Estonian publishers totals an average of 3,500. However, print runs appear to be declining: a couple hundred copies in the case of poetry collections and fewer than a thousand copies of novels. The large proportion of children's writers is one welcome aspect of today's literary field, while the abundance of high-quality translations also shows the field's maturity. In the spotlight at the front of this revolving stage are Andrus Kivirähk (b. 1970; best-selling work *November*, 2000), Tõnu Õnnepalu (b. 1962; *Border State*, 1993), and Indrek Hargla (b. 1970; the now eight-part *Apothecary Melchior* historical crime series).

Vahur Afanasjev (1979–2021) contributed a new epic to contemporary Estonian literature with *Serafima and Bogdan* (2017), set on the shores of Lake Peipus. Noteworthy modern poets include Doris Kareva (b. 1958), who has achieved the status of a living classic, and Triin Soomets (b. 1969). Jürgen Rooste (b. 1979) has left a striking mark with his socially critical poems. Every

two years, the Estonian Writers' Union holds a novel-writing competition that generates dynamic new fiction (*Serafima and Bogdan* won in 2017). Armin Kõomägi (b. 1969), who has won the Friedebert Tuglas Award for Short Stories twice, took first place in the 2015 competition with his apocalyptic novel *Lui Vuton*. Estonia can also boast a fantastic writer of magical realism: Mehis Heinsaar (b. 1973), whose outstanding collections include *Snatcher of Old Men* (2001) and *The Chronicles of Mr. Paul* (2011). Urmas Vadi (b. 1977) has occupied a unique literary niche with his original style, and Kaur Riismaa (b. 1986), who practices several genres, stands out with his polished writing that brims with dreamlike transitions and allegories (*The Blind Man's Gardens*, 2015, and *Snow in Livonia*, 2022). And of course, this group includes the award-winning prose writers of the new generation Lilli Luuk (b. Kristina Tamm, 1976) and Mudlum (b. Made Luiga, 1966) and the angelic poet Kristiina Ehin (b. 1977).

Another aspect of the revolving stage is the fact that the 1960s generation is packing up its earlier works and heading to the back alongside writers who are now mere historical figures. Starlight can also penetrate that periphery, however, as demonstrated by Paul-Eerik Rummo and his play *It Rains Stones All the Time* (2015), an “anachronistic capriccio” based on Jaan Kross’s historical short story “Skystone” (1975); Jaak Jõerüüt (b. 1947) with his confessional diary-novel *Variable* (2017); and Viivi Luik with her documentary novel *The Golden Crown* (2023), which depicts life as a magical crossword puzzle and won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s Annual Award for Literature.

Although neither authors nor revolving-stage literature possess the same

authority in Estonian society as they enjoyed in the 1980s, the fate of Estonian literature in the 21st century will be decided not at the desks and computers of writers so much as it will be in schools, libraries, and every family that still engages in reading and finds the necessary time for it. Every book is in a state of suspended animation until it finds its audience—a process of eternal resurrection.

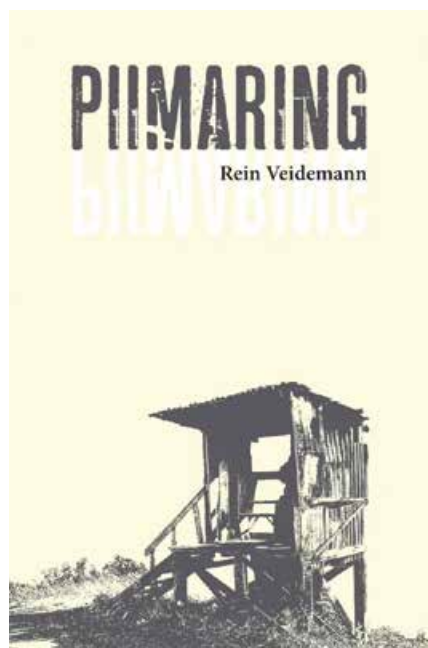
Rein Veidemann (b. 1946) is a literary scholar, cultural essayist, writer, and professor emeritus at Tallinn University. He also taught Estonian literature and culture at the University of Tartu from 2001 to 2005. Veidemann has published over twenty works, primarily collections of articles and essays, five novels, and one poetry collection.

REIN VEIDEMANN

Piimaring Milk Circle

EKSA, 2018, 280 pp.

ISBN 9789949604760



On the Possibility of Mati Unt's Prose, Decades Later

by Maimu Berg

***Mati Unt** (1944–2005), who would have turned 80 this year, first became known to his peers as a prose writer more than six decades ago. His memory lives on, and one could say that Estonia is even experiencing its own Unt “boom”. Writer Mihkel Mutk recently published a comprehensive biography titled *The Butterfly Who Flew Too Close: Mati Unt and His Era*, which explores his late friend’s life as an author, essayist, theater director, and human.*

Mati Unt was born on January 1, 1944, in the little town of Linnamäe, Voore Parish. His family farmstead bore an endearing and quite literal name: *Kodu*, or “home”. Alas, Estonian homes were in danger when Mati came into the world, as the Second World War’s eastern front had just swept across the country, and the German occupation was replaced by Russian occupation. They were hard and complicated times, just as times have almost always been in Estonia. We can only imagine the conversations and emotions in the little farmhouse of Mati’s Stalin-era childhood—conversations that were bound to influence his later life. The vista from the glass veranda of that hilltop house was spectacular.

Mati’s schooling in a fieldstone schoolhouse in Leedimäe ended in 1958, only to continue at the nationally renowned Secondary School No. 8 in

Tartu. The Estonian language teacher Vello Saage maintained a lofty literary spirit there; it was a time when writers were admired, and literature was in vogue. Saage’s students published a literary almanac titled *Tipa-Tapa* (“baby steps”). Mati, who was talented in several fields, became its primary illustrator. Yet, it was also in those years that he wrote his first novel, *Farewell, Yellow Cat*, published when he enrolled at the University of Tartu in 1963 to study Estonian and journalism.

The book became a sensation among Mati’s peers, being a fully mature “real novel” by a brand-new author. Literature-loving university students nationwide read it, discussed it, and either approved or condemned it. But above all, they marveled. It is a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist, someone with whom many young men of that period could identify, searches for himself but only ends up making seemingly casual and simple relationships and discussions hard and burdensome. Young Estonian readers received their very own local Holden Caulfield (Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in Estonian translation in 1961).

The novel’s success came as no surprise, as it was remarkably different from earlier post-war Estonian literature (which was also printed in

MATI UNT / photo National
Archive / author unknown



significantly smaller quantities, not to mention much lower quality, compared with Estonian diaspora literature of that same period). Still, timid new winds had begun to blow. Villem Gross (1922–2001) published the young-adult novel *Spreading the Wings* in 1958 and his very popular *Unfinished Single-Family Dwelling for Sale*, a novel about a crumbling young marriage (a topic the Soviet system preferred to avoid back then) in 1962. Unt mentions the latter novel, albeit with light sarcasm (and no doubt on purpose), in his short novel *On the Possibility of Life in Space* (1967). One can assume that the success of Gross's book caught Unt's attention (who was extremely sensitive about his own reception) and even made him jealous.

The unexpectedly warm response to Unt's first novel inspired him to write another in 1964: *Debt*. Whereas books that addressed youth sexuality (some

strongly, others weakly; some psychologically, others less so) were published during Estonia's first interwar independence, and the genre was also practiced in exile, they generally weren't available to young readers under Soviet occupation; what's more, the plots of such books were usually set in the past and/or strikingly different conditions. Mati Unt was writing here and now. Cautiously, yes, but in an almost revolutionary way, given the falsely puritanical morals of Soviet society.

Debt successfully garnered a societal response. One book discussion in Tartu drew a packed auditorium, primarily university students. Passions ran high during the debate, and Unt's work exited the boundaries of its subject matter, turning dangerously societally critical. The atmosphere was tense, and some speeches were shockingly bold, as if the event was an opportunity to test the boundaries of the 1960s thaw. Mati stood before the crowd with competing expressions of astonishment, fear, and satisfaction. He'd been honest and sincere in his writing, taking only a few minor divergences from the standard ideology. *The Catcher in the Rye* is also popularly believed to have influenced Unt's *Debt* in terms of its subject matter, style, and even sentence structure.

Unt's *On the Possibility of Life in Space* and *Via Regia* (1975)—his second and sixth books, respectively—were re-published this year in the *Loomingu Raamat* classic series. As of 1967, he wrote a work of fiction almost every year—mainly short novels and stories—and could already count himself as a fruitful and prolific author. Still, he probably had no idea his ambitions were already drifting away from literature.

The two novels made newly available this year are clearly products of

MATI UNT in 1972 / photo
National Archive / author unknown





MATI UNT in 1973 / photo National Archive / author unknown

their era, starting with the title of the former. Space was a popular topic in the 1960s, and cinema marquees advertised Russian films starring actors who played astronomers and astrophysicists (*Supernova* was a similar 1965 Estonian film). There was much discussion and writing about the conflict between lyricists and physicists. Some elements, including the two protagonists (a lyricist and a physicist), can be found in *On the Possibility of Life in Space*, though the ending is more tragic than heroic. Thanks to plentiful references, the book offers a glimpse into the author's own widening and diversifying literary interests, though it didn't garner more attention than his first work; it seems people were getting used to Unt. Soon, several other exciting young prose writers entered the scene: Arvo Valton, Enn Vetemaa, Rein Saluri, Teet Kallas, Vaino Vahing, and more.

Via Regia, the second republished Unt novel, confirms suspicions that can be drawn from his earlier works:

he was becoming increasingly engrossed in theater. Unt worked at the Vanemuine Theater in Tartu from 1966–1972 and was the director of literature at the Tallinn Youth Theater starting in 1975. He was a dynamic force in renewing the Tartu theater scene along with several famous Estonian actors and directors. Mare Puusepp, the “prima donna” of that renewal, later became his wife.

Eventually, literature was put on Unt's back burner, and drama became the dominant topic of his writing. Most of *Via Regia* takes place in the theater, several characters are based on theatrical prototypes, and a number of scenes are exact accounts of actual events. Unt's directing career began the moment it was published.

It's worth mentioning the plays and dramatic adaptations he wrote (15 altogether), the most unusual of which was *Phaethon, Son of the Sun* (1968, staged in Vanemuine Theater). Critic and theatrical scholar Lea Tormis

wrote: “Although *Phaeton* has no primitive symbolism or simplified parallels to the present, the author shows palpable concern for the modern day and a clear attitude towards the struggle between progress and reactionary forces.”

Therefore, Unt’s literary style can be perceived in the play as well. He nevertheless continued writing many successful books, the most outstanding of which is *The Autumn Ball* (1979): an urban novel, or rather a novel set in a specific area of the city. He and his girlfriend at the time, actress Kersti Kreismann, were living in Tallinn’s new Mustamäe district; their apartment was perpetually open to a revolving crowd of bohemian guests as they experienced the joys and pains of theater work.

MIHKEL MUTT

Liblikas, kes lendas liiga lähedale.

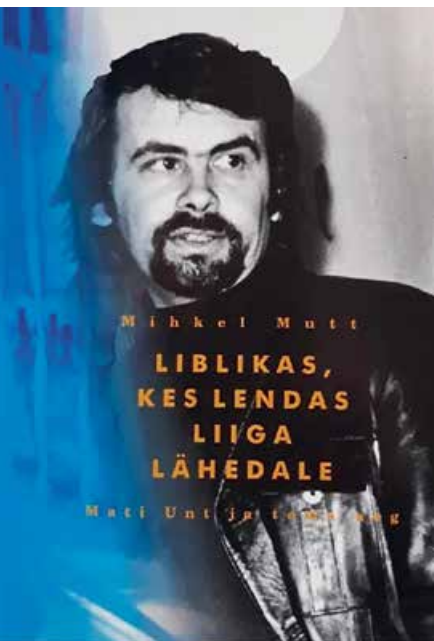
Mati Unt ja tema aeg

The Butterfly that Flew Too Close

Mati Unt and His Era

Fabian 2023–2024, 472 pp.

ISBN 9789916952221



A year before *The Autumn Ball* came out, writer Arvo Valton (b. 1935) was also inspired by the organically strange and novel architectural district and published a collection of short stories that included “Mustamäe Romance”. Compared to Unt’s novel, however, it is more of a general introduction to the genre.

Maarja Vaino has analyzed the symbol of “home” in the work: “In Tallinn, Unt socialized with artists and architects, learning concepts of spatial theory that were popular at the time. This broad range of architectural utopias is most prominent in *The Autumn Ball*.”

The Autumn Ball was turned into a feature film in 2007—or rather, director Veiko Õunpuu based his film on the novel. Unfortunately, Unt passed away two years before its release and could not participate in the production. He was, however, a screenwriter for two earlier films: *Ask the Dead About the Price of Death* (1977) and *In One Hundred Years in May* (1986). Critics later accused Unt of displaying excessive Soviet allegiance in his manuscripts, especially in the latter film, which depicts the final four days in the life of underground communist Viktor Kingissepp in May 1922. The author claimed he was only interested in Kingissepp’s story as that of a tragic historical figure, asserting that he gathered the materials in a fervor and wrote the script in accordance with his conscience.

Another of Unt’s novels that sparked discourse when it was published is *Things in the Night* (1990), which has been called the “most irony-filled work of Estonian literature”. If reviewers are to be believed, then the complex and uniquely abstruse postmodernist work attempts to demonstrate literature’s endless possibilities, which I believe are truly endless and actually lead nowhere.

Alternately, it can be seen as Unt's attempt to impress his readers. Although it is an exhausting novel, it offers some excitement and forces one to reevaluate readability. The title was taken from a scene in the beloved and easily readable *Summer* by the popular classic Oskar Luts (1887–1953), in which the protagonist holds a late-night discussion with his dog. Overall, Luts was an inspiration to Unt in both literature and the theater.

Unt's novel *Diary of a Blood Donor* (1990) intentionally echoes Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) but casts the romantic-nationalist Estonian poet Lydia Koidula's (1843–1886) husband Eduard Michelson in the role of Dracula, unable to cope with his wife being exhumed from her grave in Kronstadt and reburied in Estonia, he sets out to commit bloody vampirism.

Brecht at Night (1997) could have been a historical novel, but Unt wouldn't be Unt if he were to limit himself to simply recounting how Bertolt Brecht and his wife took refuge with the Estonian-born Finnish writer Hella Wuolijoki in Helsinki—especially considering that the Soviet Union was hatching malicious plans against the Republic of Estonia at that time. Although fragmentary, the novel is also noteworthy in that it shows the direction in which Unt's writing was headed.

Alas, we will never know the possible destination, as he only published plays from then until his death in 2005. Serving two masters is an overwhelming task, and one might expect that the world of actors—one offering an insatiable thirst for living and rewarding work as a collective—seemed much more attractive than the solitude of a writer's den. Seeing one's audience at premieres and receiving their applause and gratitude in person would no doubt make someone with any vanity gravitate toward the genre as well.

That being said, theater is also more thankless than literature: performances will be forgotten, and no recording can adequately convey the atmosphere and emotions one felt. A book may collect dust for years and years, but there's still hope that one day, a hand will pull it from the shelf, and new eyes will latch onto the sentences. What's more, someone can give it new life in the form of another print, as recently happened to two of Unt's works.

Maimu Berg (b. 1945) is an Estonian writer, reviewer, translator, journalist, and politician.

MATI UNT

Via Regia/

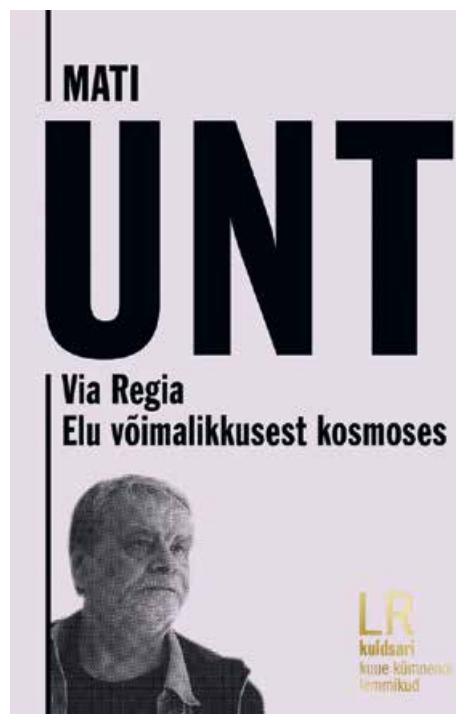
Elu võimalikkusest kosmoses

Via Regia/

On the Possibility of Life in Space

Kultuurileht, 2023, 127 pp.

ISBN 9789916713716





URMAS VADI
Kuu teine pool
The Far Side of the Moon

Kolm Tarka, 2023, 384 pp.
 ISBN 9789916420027

The Far Side of the Moon

by Urmass Vadi

[pp. 7–9]

A Mobile Mind

Each of us contains a tiny inheritance that only those belonging to a family can appreciate. We all have a history. We all come from somewhere, carry something within, and remember something, even if we don't really want to sometimes. Towering in the corner of a living room is an old grandfather clock that somberly counts the minutes and strikes the hours as if to say: this hour is hereby up—how did you use it? Huh? Some homes have gilded-framed mirrors in which you can only discern your reflection by memory. A classmate of mine had a parlor organ. When you pumped the instrument, it produced sounds that came not just from beyond the ages, but from the afterlife. We shivered in horror but couldn't make ourselves stop until the old neighbor downstairs started banging a broom against his ceiling.

My own family's ancestral relics included a saying that my mother carried.

“Our family has never had cheats, crazies, or smokers!”

They were three steadfast facts, a trio of whales that our world stood upon and on which my mother could lean whenever she began losing her balance and everything turned dim. They were for moments when she needed to say something irrefutable; when she was possessed by a great, powerful intuition that the truth was on her side but arguments were running out. Whenever a dispute veered towards the unclear and ridiculous, you could expect her to play that card and end the whole debate. None of us disputed the saying. Not I, my sister, or my father, because suspicion would otherwise fall upon us and none of us wanted to be a cheat, a crazy, or a smoker. Who would?

No one remembered who had said it first. Had it been our city grandma who'd heard it from her mother, who'd heard it from her mother in turn? Had the saying been modulated and adapted throughout history according to need? As children, lots remained puzzling and obscure in the haze of Soviet society. My sister Kerli and I couldn't necessarily fathom the world with all its complications and contradictions, but that saying was something we knew for certain. When Dad returned home after a weekend visiting our country grandmother, he brought back fleas and a heavy, agitated air. All kinds of nasty comments began hopping around the apartment with those tiny parasites. The kitchen door was closed but words still penetrated the wood. Occasionally, it's necessary to raise one's voice to make it clear how those bad habits and weak genes find their way into a family. And ultimately, that saying shot from Mom's mouth. Fleas were the least of our worries by the time the evening ended. They remained background dancers but did make their presence known by chewing us red and spotted. Kerli and I were covered in blisters for weeks, not daring to get undressed before PE class. Were the fleas trying to tell us something? That if you humans aren't even capable of handling us, then how do you expect to communicate with your own nervous system, brain, and emotions? Are you really so sure you don't want to be fleas yourself? Things would be much easier. Maybe you want to cross over?

Once, I came across an open pack of cigarettes in the middle of the sidewalk. Heart pounding in my chest, I looked in every direction, I don't think anybody can see, I don't think anybody did. I picked it up, shoved it into my pants pocket, and walked home as if I were carrying a scalp as a war trophy. On the one hand, the sensation was tremendous and triumphant: nobody I passed had any idea what was in my pocket! But at the same time, I imagined a human scalp to be sort of bloody, hairy, and wrinkled—just as revolting as a pack of cigarettes. I showed it to Kerli. A spectrum of emotions coursed through her as well, though she didn't dare to touch it. I tried to light one between the garages of the neighboring building, but failed. Neither of us took a single puff in the end. After extensive consideration and debate, we decided to bury the pack in the community gardens. Carrying an aluminum soup spoon, we crept outside at twilight, dug a little hole between stalks of dill, poked the pack into the dirt, then covered it up and ran home. For ages, I was terrified that the cigarettes would sprout and grow and someday catch me!

Several days later, I found myself unable to explain to Dad why there was a dirty soup spoon in my jacket pocket. And as always when Dad didn't know what to do, he called Mom over, because she knew everything, including the way to ask and how to perform an interrogation. Kerli couldn't stand it and finally blurted everything out: "It was all Tom's fault..."

[pp. 56–60]

Viktor didn't give up or withdraw so easily, of course. He'd go to Mom's school at the end of the day, stuff her pockets full of pastries, smile, and say nothing. He did, however, have much to say to Grandma Lydia when he showed up at the university's chemistry warehouse where she worked. Holding a zephyr cake, he started by apologizing.

"Yes, I was despicable, but it all happened because you're so precious to me. So precious..."

But Grandma had already made her decision, and that's what she told him.

"Just let it go, let's not do this anymore, it's all over now and..."

Viktor patiently nodded along as if she were someone who shouldn't be provoked, but simply allowed to speak, all while mulling his own thoughts and searching for any opportunity to knock some sense into his beloved. Because sooner or later, Lydia will track me down and beg me to come back. And I'll say yes, Viktor mused before communicating this thought to Grandma.

"I'll wait for you."

The show of nobleness and generosity only exasperated Grandma.

"What're you going to wait for!?"

"For you!"

Viktor spread his arms, baffled by why he wasn't being allowed another chance—you have one tiny disagreement and all of a sudden, that's it! Over!

"Wait as long as you want!"

Grandma began retreating into the maze of shelves. Viktor realized that if he followed her now, then he'd end up seizing his beloved and the same thing that happened the other dreadful night in her tiny one-room apartment would repeat, but this time, she'd no doubt grab a bottle of acid from one of the shelves and smash it over his head! So, Viktor only shouted after her.

"I won't have to wait very long, you know!"

A sour smirk spread at the corner of his lips and a moment later, he realized all too palpably that what he said shouldn't have been spoken—it was a thought that he could've kept to himself, though thoughts like those tend to force their own way out of your mouth! Where it came from, Viktor couldn't say. He was quite capable of communicating and handling everyday affairs, but whenever a most precious and important thing was on the line, he simply couldn't manage, stuttered, lost his nerve, sweat beaded on his forehead, the wrong words and sentences escaped his lips, and it all melted into a mess like a zephyr cake that a factory worker had stolen the sugar from once again! He'd purloined sugar for himself, too, and had even given a couple sacks to Lydia, though he certainly didn't call it stealing—no, those were tiny victories that are good to take out on rainy days. But

why was he thinking about sugar, and why was his mind fishtailing right when he was standing face-to-face with his fate? Who's doing this to me?

"What?! *What* did you say!?" Grandma demanded angrily. She knew exactly what he was implying, of course, but wanted him to state it clearly. And Viktor did, though later, time and again, he had to admit it would've been best to stay silent.

"He doesn't have many more days to live, you know."

Could we come up with a means of communication to use instead of talking? So many fiascos would be avoided. Viktor's life would have been immensely easier today—he'd have tapped a dozen different emoticons, even five would be enough, all that mattered was like, like, like! But back then, he was forced to search for the words when Grandma demanded them.

"What business is it of yours, how much time he has left to live?"

"What's the point of living with someone who's going to die any day now?"

"We all die someday."

"Yes, but is there any point..."

Viktor had no idea where the line of thought was going and trailed off, but then, some devil forced him to open his mouth again.

"Is there any point in being with him for such a fleeting moment when you could be with me till the end of your life..."

Ugh.

"Don't go flaunting your longevity to me! Are you so sure it's worth more than his fleeting moment?" Grandma retorted.

Viktor increasingly resembled a deflating zephyr cake.

"My life?" he mumbled. Inflation was so limitless! Just this morning, he'd dressed, combed his hair, picked up the cake, and now? Viktor tried to scrape himself together.

"Lydia, I don't want him to die. Trust me—I want you!"

"Well, that's something. Otherwise you'd just be a murderer."

"No, definitely, I'm not, I... And I'll wait for you. Soon, when he's gone, come and find me, I'll still be here." Even the cake was a much stouter and worthier chunk of matter than what remained of Viktor. Grandma started to pity the man and ushered him out the door like a child.

"Viktor, you don't need to wait. Don't come back here."

It would have been a long wait, indeed, as Grandpa lived another thirty years. He cleaned himself up in the sauna, shaved, dressed in clothes that Great Uncle Heimar provided, left his tattered coat (from the pockets of which Grandma would find loose tobacco years later) hanging on the sauna chimney, and moved into the apartment. That day, Hugo was the only one who sampled Viktor's cake, and he complimented it.

"Anything thicker than boiled water's as good as a stew! And every new day you're given comes extra!"

Did Viktor really make his exit, come to terms with his fate, and leave my grandma alone? Or did he contact her over and over again, falling to his knees, weeping and begging, promising her the earth and the sky? Did he plot his revenge, attempting to accelerate Grandpa's death, and mix arsenic into the bread dough, hoping that one of the loaves would find its way to Hugo's table? Did he at least fling a fist-sized cobblestone through Grandma's window one night? Put a curse on the tiny room he'd been staying in just a handful of nights ago? Who knows, who knows! Or maybe he did find someone else with whom he could eat cake and share his life! And if he did, then was it the love of his life, or did Viktor still think about his Lydia while lying next to her, suffering in silence, growing bitter and spiteful and criticizing his wife for not being Lydia?

We know so very little of bakers' tribulations, or even of the tribulations of those with whom we aren't familiar but are still invisible characters in our daily lives. Mailmen, bakers, bus drivers, salesclerks, custodians. The tragedy of poets and composers, their fates and melancholy, reach us through their works. But perhaps we perceive the sadness and rage of those strangers in some inexplicable way, too. We exit the grocery store, encountering a life-wearied cashier at the register, walk home with shopping bags hanging at both sides, pull out a package of butter and a carton of milk, set them on the counter, and out of nowhere, not understanding why, we burst into uncontrollable tears and wrap ourselves around the leg of the dining table in the fetal position. Or we're at the repair shop with all its gross, greasy, mustachioed men who hate their job and our car, wanting to sink their teeth into the whole world, and a short time later, we're driving home, summer tires on the road, studded tires in the trunk, and halfway there we start cursing and yelling behind the wheel, roll down the window, and let everybody have it! Energies travel and just as ingredients are listed on food packaging—sugars, fats, proteins, carbohydrates—it might've been honest to put a warning on Viktor's baked goods: consume this bread at your own risk, as it was baked by a balding fifty-three-year-old bachelor who gravitates towards obesity and melancholy and might bite his glass and chew it to bits because he can't take this loneliness anymore!

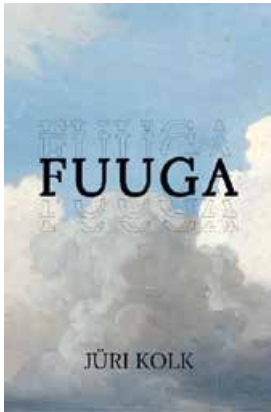
Translated by Adam Cullen

Read the review of the book p. 46

Urmas Vadi (b. 1977) is an Estonian writer, journalist, scriptwriter, and director. He entered dramaturgy writing children's plays, the first professional production of which was *The Flying Ship* at Vanemuine Theater in 2000. Since then, countless others have been performed. In 2004, Vadi made his directing debut with the play *Let's Meet in the Trumpet* at VAT Theater. He has written nearly two dozen books and received numerous awards. Vadi's latest novel, *The Far Side of the Moon* (2024), received the prestigious Vilde Award for Literature and was nominated for the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature.

URMAS VADI / photo Ken Mürk /
ERR / Scanpix Baltics



**JÜRI KOLK****Fuuga***Fugue*

Puänt, 2023, 48 pp.

ISBN 9789916968284

Fugue

by Jüri Kolk

Selection translated by Adam Cullen

i'm tormented by certain questions thoughts dim fancies on
 the edge of my vision flickering shadows weight upon my heart
 i've spoken of them and searched for answers but the answers
 creep away i've tried to address them in articles dissect them in
 literature maybe i really should ask more brazenly more consist-
 ently more institutionally maybe i should organize a protest stand
 alone in front of the art hall with a placard asking what's the point
 of life demanding the philosophy department to say what is beau-
 ty stand in front of the psychiatry clinic and the zoology museum
 with a placard i'm with you in spirit ask where is my root by the
 song festival grounds what connects us in front of a restaurant i'm
 always hungry near the dive bar but we're rather miserable going
 home in the morning on the library steps why are some not even
 helped by reading by the bus station is better anywhere else near
 the jail all those barricades after a couple sardines on the bank of
 the emajõgi why the incessant rush at the cemetery gates where
 to next and how i'd just stand around and ask those questions in
 those places and in others and other people would stare annoyed
 or amused or indifferent would watch me standing patiently
 effortlessly demandingly uncompromisingly and maybe some
 of them would sometimes be somewhat with me in spirit maybe
 some of them would somehow feel lighter or at least different not
 so alone

**you scramble around like a fly in the sticky web of my
memory** i sigh cautiously then untangle you again bid
farewell safe travels safe travels time to go don't trip no
don't you turn back my memory rag can't wipe fly gunk
from the world leave my nutshell once and for all so musty
and stuffy no don't turn back you really aren't welcome i'll
shoot at you from all trumpets i'll hide somewhere pack up
my memory web why won't you just let me finally retreat
and cautiously back away axe held ready to strike enter the
future such that i leave no trace my past glints would stop
shaking you off

why on earth dear heavens did you bring me a swan you realize what a terrible overstatement it is the huge bird could barely swim in the pond by which me a poor farmhand hasn't even a sauna where do you expect me to go with that bird people will give me strange looks in public they won't even let me into the theater or into the building where they dance swan lake and what kind of a message would it give to my swan anyway my swan with bends of the wing aching from the cramped pond not that it would ever be my swan it'd probably turn into a god instead bobbing slowly towards my bed at night head full of lecherous thoughts and even if it doesn't bob then where there's god there's trouble a rooster with him we'll go fishing the rooster stares pensively at the dark water and i do too we leave the hooks at home when we look for worms the rooster gobbles them up

Jüri Kolk (b. 1972) is an Estonian writer, translator, and publicist. His debut poetry collection, *Barbarian Conan in the Land Behind the Looking-Glass (and What He Spoke There)*, was published in 2009, and he has written nearly two dozen books since then. His poetry book *Fugue* received the 2023 Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Poetry.

JÜRI KOLK / photo Ken Mürk / ERR / Scanpix Baltics



Where Are You Going, Estonian Lit?

by Helena Läks, Reijo Roos,
Karola Ainsar, Johan Haldna

ELM asked three young Estonian writers to consider the future of Estonian literature. What direction is its substance and form heading? What young authors should we Google every now and then in the coming years? Above all, what can be done to keep us all reading? Karola Ainsar, Johan Haldna, and Reijo Roos shared their thoughts.

Reijo Roos: There Will Always Be a Writer Who Wants to Say Something and a Reader Who Will Listen

It's not easy to predict the future, much less the future of Estonian literature, which, given its small nature, is relatively receptive to outside influences. The influential authors of the future may not even have begun writing yet and might not even be born.

I bounced ideas around with a few others who deal with young Estonian writers. Each approached the question from a unique angle, which shows how broadly something as diverse as Estonian literature can be viewed.

When discussing the trends that have stood out in the last few years, Hanna Linda Korp, the editor of the youth literary magazine *Värske Rõhk*, highlighted the popularity of linguistically playful and surrealistic poetry. Poetry seems to be a springboard into writing for many young Estonian authors, as it can be

written casually and is easy to share. Generally speaking, fiction has become more autobiographical, which is a trend that's also present in Finland.

The multitalented (composer, oboist, poet, literary critic, and model) Gregor Kulla believes Estonian literature has diversified, with different social groups enjoying increasingly better representation. Young writers are questioning the classical canon (though that could, of course, characterize the youth of every era). Poet, artist, and journalist Sanna Kartau says that Estonian literature is somewhat misleading because writing (and art overall) isn't always (or often) practiced out of a sense of national belonging but to express oneself and gain the attention of other creative persons. In other words, even the diversification of national identities that stems from globalization can be seen as a factor that affects literature.

There's also no avoiding technology, which appears to be taking over every area of life. Digital devices make writing easier and easier, and the internet has made sharing texts and finding literary information nearly effortless. Reading itself has been streamlined by books' digital and audio versions. As a counterbalance, the rest of media has also accelerated and facilitated the practicing of other arts. Literature has seem-

ingly grown more niche while competing with film, video, photography, and other newer genres for attention. The options available to those who produce and consume art have increased, which is naturally positive in and of itself.

Additionally, AI is making text creation increasingly accessible, though I don't believe it'll steal work from writers themselves. In the same way that the rise of digital cameras didn't suppress the creation of photography but rather boosted the value of photos taken on film, AI will only help more people to create fiction while not reducing (and maybe conversely increasing) the value of human-written texts.

AI, the metaverse, and other similar phenomena may impact how literature is consumed but are unlikely to change the process of creating it. There will always be a writer who wants to say something and a reader who will listen. So, it has been for generations and is unlikely to change in the next fifty years. Some topics might be more prominent over the coming decades (i.e. climate, equal rights, artificial intelligence, and globalization). Still, in the end, people are fascinated most by other people's thoughts and emotions.

It's hard to say who or what will pan out in the long term while existing within the process. Looking back over the last thirty years, time has polished clear aspects that characterize the period in retrospect. Today's clarity may be given by thirty more years of waiting, but even so, I'd like to conclude by naming a few specific young writers who have recently stood out – both to me and to the peers I mentioned earlier. These people seem to stand almost neck-deep in literature. Fatally, fully.

Aliis Aalmann, Johan Haldna, Elisabeth Heinsalu, Richard Jerbach, Saara Liis Jöerand, Sanna Kartau, Sofia-Eliza



REIJO ROOS (b. 2003) is an Estonian-Finnish poet who has published two collections: *cranes eagles seagulls* and *hi may I* (the latter in Estonian and Võro). In 2021, he founded the Youth Section of the Estonian Writers' Union, which has brought together a new generation of writers and publishes an annual almanac titled *Grafomaania*. Roos became the youngest member of the Estonian Writers' Union in 2023 / photo private archive

veta Katkova, Gregor Kulla, Triinu Kree, Katrin Kõuts, Kertu Kändla, Riste Sofie Käär, Emma Lotta Lõhmus, Janika Läänemets, Liisa Mudist, Heneliis Notton, Mirjam Parve, and Hella Õitspuu.

Karola Ainsar: Between Picture and Word – How Can We Get Everyone to Read?

I grew up in a village surrounded by fields and gravel roads. In summer, you could walk quite far without encountering anyone. But you also had to know what direction to take. The village has a little library with a blue roof. When I think back to my childhood, I also think of books, summer, and a tent my parents gave me, set up behind our apartment block, where I'd read borrowed library books. Engrossed in some, scanning pictures in others. Big, heavy books were good for reading at home; smaller, lighter ones for reading on the way somewhere else.

The library, which doubled as a culture and information center, became a place where I learned how a community shares knowledge and spends time together. It must have left a deep impression at a very young age because, on my fifth birthday, I set up a “reading corner” in my bedroom where I’d read my grandma’s fairy tales. I believe that the written word plays an important part in bringing people together.

Together with artist Daria Morozova, I started working at the Täisnurga Gallery last autumn. Instead of drafting a text to accompany every exhibition, we print an interview with an English translation. I don’t see galleries as magic spaces where the exhibition immediately pulls visitors into its enchantment. A text can be a quiet and effective guide if it’s put into an accessible form, and you establish favorable conditions for reading it.

I’ve been greatly influenced by some of the Estonian Academy of Art’s publications on artists who use interviews to document, archive, and communicate.

KAROLA AINSAR (b. 2000) is a writer and painter who focuses on the mundane moments, desires, dreams, and beliefs that inevitably develop through the repetitions of daily life / photo private archive



Another example of what’s fresh and breathing in today’s rhythm is the Association of Young Estonian Contemporary Art’s monthly newsletter, which always has an interview that reveals what young artists are currently discussing.

When we document and create a common field of information by sharing that documentation, then often, meetings that didn’t actually take place occur in real-time. When I go to a flea market and buy a booklet from an exhibition that I missed but which some of my acquaintances probably visited, then I encounter that and that place with a slight delay. When I come across a group exhibition catalog and leaf through it over and over again, I hold within myself a place that I can share with others without us ever needing to speak about it.

Small publications fit in your pocket, and A4-sized paper can be folded and taken along, so I always grab two copies of the text from every exhibition I visit. Whenever I meet another archivist, I give them one to read so they can make contact with what I’ve already encountered. I believe there’ll always be something I can take along, and we’ll always meet on every occasion without fail.

Johan Haldna: Back to Stories

I don’t have much to say about Estonian literature’s future health and success. I don’t know how much will be read, whether it’ll be translated, or how much will be paid in grant money. What I can speak about as an author is where I believe literature’s form and substance are headed.

But before I venture to outline the future, I must talk about the present (as I see it). Books written by today’s youth, including my own, typically contain introspection guided by a desire to write an *insightful* work that might make the author,

reader, or both more *whole*. It's a form of self-therapy that operates through the detailed observation of one's surroundings. A few possible mantras might include keeping everything in mind, not only thinking about yourself, fostering and applying empathy, speaking of things you're afraid to talk about, and criticizing yourself as much as you criticize others.

The youth literary magazine *Värske Rõhk* includes a section in diary format, which is a form of writing that matters greatly to young authors. Equally important are travelogues, personal (paper) letters, dreams, and memories, not as fiction, but as documents or archival entries that accumulate. The end goal of this accumulation is, of course, emancipation. However, we differ from modernists in our manner of achieving that freedom: therapy, not revolution. Introspection isn't the sole or most important characteristic of young Estonian literature, and neither is it our own invention. Here, I'd point more to the author Tõnu Õnnepalu. At the same time, some young authors have begun to protest this introspection, and I believe it'll work out for them.

I predict the return of the "good story". I predict young Estonian literature will adopt the fictiveness of any substance and form and might, therefore, break its oath of introspection, i.e. every book constituting a piece of the emancipation puzzle. Naive tales, myths, and legends will return. Stories in which the relationship between substance and reality doesn't matter. Questions such as "Did that really happen?" and "What does this book tell me about the real world?" will also be equally unimportant. Literature won't totally lose its ties to the real world or rise entirely to the heights of fantasy, but those ties will become secondary. The



JOHAN HALDNA (b. 2000) is a writer, poet, and filmmaker / photo private archive

introspective "What do these feelings mean?" will be replaced by "Was that a good story?" Differences will be multifaceted and cardinal. Whereas a story will be made up of one or two works, the glimmering meaning of "feelings" will be embroidered throughout the fabric of the author's entire catalogue. Characters in a story are simplified persons *a priori*. Introspective literature, on the other hand, is populated by persons whose simplification into "characters" would reduce that introspection's quality. Stories are usually longer than introspections and easier to read, as the linguistic meta-level of the latter isn't necessary in any ordinary tale.

My only conviction is that young Estonian readers *long* for stories, and we yearn for a gripping, interesting narrative. Increasingly, we prefer writers like Olga Tokarczuk or Ursula Le Guin over those like Õnnepalu, books in which the characters experience more than just buying rye bread from a Soviet grocery truck. Less introspection, more fantasy.

Helena Lüks (b. 1987) is an Estonian poet, editor, and publisher.

Everyone Has a “Cold Closet” and a “Dust Sucker” at Home

by Annika A. Koppel

Literally Estonian was crowdfunded and published in October 2023. This January, it was recognized in the Estonian Publishers’ Union’s 25 Best-Designed Books competition and received the National Library of Estonia’s Golden Book Special Prize. Recently, a proposal has been made to include its illustrations in Estonia’s stand at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair.

This all came as good news to the book’s author, Karel Polt. Karel was born in Estonia but has lived abroad for 20 years—eight in London and the rest in Los Angeles. He began to truly treasure the Estonian language and culture while living in English-language environments and now appreciates and thinks about these aspects of Estonia more than he ever did when living in his native country.

Where did you get the idea for this book?

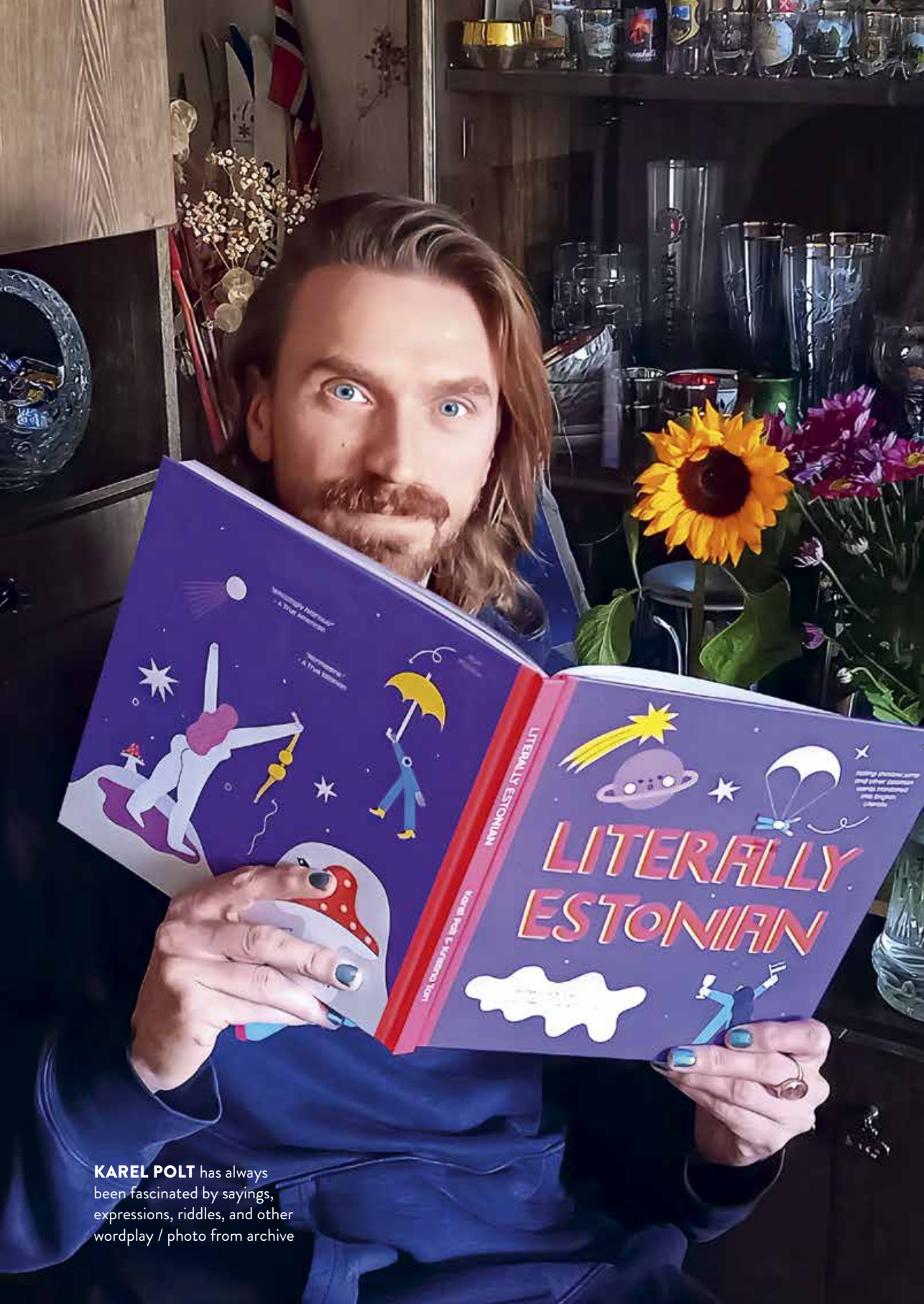
I’ve always been fascinated by sayings, expressions, riddles, and other wordplay. They delight and inspire me and make for comical everyday moments when I accidentally translate an Estonian word directly into English, resulting in a funny look

from my American partner. Like when I said “cold closet” (Estonian *külmkapp*) instead of “fridge” and “dust sucker” (*tolmuimeja*) instead of “vacuum cleaner.” Mistakes like those led to starting my popular Instagram account @literally_estonian, where I post direct Estonian translations three times a week. One day, my friend Helen Tootsi (author of *Minu Los Angeles*, *My Los Angeles*) suggested I turn the account into a book. That’s where it began; that’s also why the format is square.

The book was illustrated by Kristina Tort, whose art can’t be over-appreciated.

How did you find her?

I started looking for an illustrator when the idea for the book began to take shape. Right away, I knew I needed to collaborate with an Estonian illustrator to support Estonian art. I found Kristina on a Facebook group where Estonian artists post their work, and her work caught my eye. Kristina’s humorous style fits the subject matter perfectly. I reached out when I visited Estonia in the summer of 2021 and invited her to coffee. When I finally got around to explaining the idea for the book, she was inspired and enthralled from the get-go, too! That coffee kicked



KAREL POLT has always been fascinated by sayings, expressions, riddles, and other wordplay / photo from archive

off two years of close collaboration. There was a lot of work to do, as the book has almost 130 pages with about 400 words and expressions. Some were incredibly hard to illustrate, like *iseloom* (“self animal,” i.e., character/personality).

This isn't your first time working with wordplay – you created a game using the sounds animals make in different languages.

That's true! In 2019, I published a card game in Estonia called *Mis? Miz?!*, where players have to pair animals and birds found in Estonia with the sounds they make in Estonian. For instance, a duck and the words *Prääks! Prääks!* or a bear and *Mõmm! Mõmm!* A little added fun comes from the rule that when you play a noise card, you must make it really loud. And as you don't have to know Estonian to play, people who

don't speak the language will still find it hilarious, especially when they have to try to make Estonian animal noises themselves!

You used Kickstarter to finance the book. What was that like?

Yes, the crowdfunding was to cover the printing costs. Kickstarter highlighted the campaign in their “Projects We Love” section right off the bat, and we hit our goal in the very first week. Our supporters included friends, family members, acquaintances, and total strangers from various Estonian communities around the globe and long-time Instagram followers. Preparing the project was like a full-time job and a huge challenge. I had to overcome myself and my expectations, as I am an introvert, and self-promotion has always been difficult. The funniest and most embarrassing part was

Illustrations from a book / Kristina Tort





Illustrations from a book / Kristina Tort

nian friends, colleagues, and family. The Estonian Foreign Ministry added our book to their official gift bag, meaning it's been handed out in missions worldwide—something for which I'm incredibly grateful. What's more, several Estonians based in Estonia have said it's helped them discover many new and exciting aspects of the language, which they use in their everyday lives. Estonians don't often think about why we use words like *kuutõbine* ("moon sick", i.e., sleepwalker), *hundiratas* ("wolf's wheel", i.e., cartwheel), or *sõnajalg* ("word foot", i.e., fern), or how bizarre they might sound to someone who's just started to learn Estonian and is trying to understand.

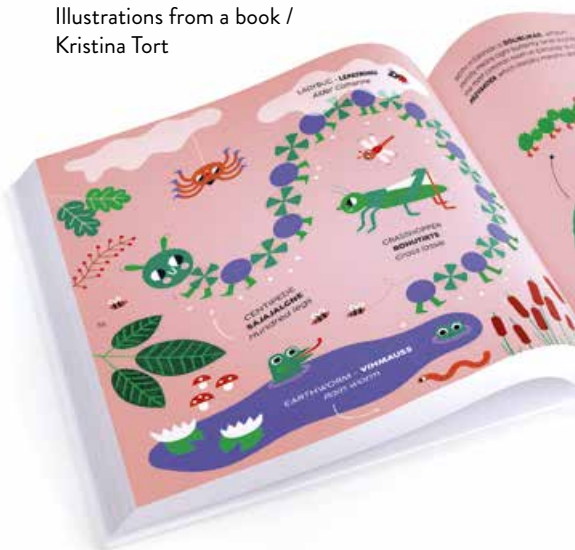
Annika A. Koppel (b. 1964) is the editor-in-chief of *Estonian Literary Magazine*.

the introductory video, in which I talked about the idea and gave a few direct-translation examples, ending with my favorite: *väike merineitsi* ("little mermaid") a.k.a. "small sea virgin". It all paid off because the result was a successful campaign praised by several Estonian diaspora outlets and ultimately received 160% funding. The most far-flung funders of which came from Singapore and the Arab Emirates.

Who is the book's audience?

Literally Estonian is, first and foremost, a humorous English-language coffee-table book that introduces the Estonian language and culture and would be a great gift for non-Esto-

Illustrations from a book / Kristina Tort



Book Reviews



URMAS VADI
Kuu teine pool
The Far Side of the Moon

Kolm Tarka, 2023, 384 pp.
ISBN 9789916420027

Review by *Karl-Martin Sinijärv*

Urmas Vadi has staged literary scenes where absolute realism and the absurd come together to form a bizarre cohabitation for years, if not decades. In his world, reality is often stranger than the imagined, and fantasy seems mundane and uncomplicated; Vadi's writing is ludicrous

but doesn't go too far. By changing a tiny detail or two, he's capable of displacing an entire ordinary, everyday setting.

Even having lived through the wild 80s and 90s in Estonia, *The Far Side of the Moon* feels like a work of science fiction. True, I was in different cities and social settings, not to mention having a different family life. And yet, reading about those decades in Vadi's book is like having an out-of-body experience. Or rather, he manages to work that whole world and period so deep beneath my skin that it reads like a fairy tale, although a rather painful and hostile one. Yet, at the same time, the story is hilarious. Perhaps Vadi is a long-sought wordsmith who will release us Estonians from the agony of the recent past and transform it into a mirthfully troubled myth.

Because, to be frank, the recent past was rather shitty. I'd gladly erase the last decade of the previous century entirely from my memory. Intellectualism was paralyzed, and survival was life's primary goal, turning you into a street rat. Ugh. Vadi weaves all those abominable years, starting a fair stretch before the earliest of them, into a fabric that will no doubt hold strong throughout the rest of

history and warm many generations to come. I don't know anyone who could describe those bygone transition years more genuinely than Vadi. Maybe no one apart from Lilli Luuk, who writes densely poetic short stories set in the era, though Vadi is baking a different dish entirely. *The Far Side of the Moon* comprises an unbelievable ensemble of life stories, which together form an offbeat and perfectly displaced concentration of what life was really like. Or most certainly was not.

Part of me can't wrap my head around the fact that I lived in that same world in that same time. Then, a split second later, I'm beyond certain that I did. This comes from Vadi's exceptional ability to transform the world with tiny nudges and change everything just a smidgen. Just as a magician once "made" the Statue of Liberty disappear (it's still there), Vadi creates the illusion of making history vanish (it's still there). And who cares about "objective" history, anyway? A good story is much better, and Vadi has good stories in spades. You shouldn't let facts interrupt the flow of good storytelling.

It's hard for me to imagine how well the book would work outside of Estonia. I believe that it could. On a universal scale, the charms and pains of small towns are rather similar. Not all the book's local comedy and absurdities of those moments in time can translate effortlessly, of course. But some parts will, as any good translation requires creative storytelling in and of itself. *The Far Side of the Moon* offers material galore for renewing, reworking, and recreating.

For, Vadi's novel is much more than a quaint family story involving Estonians at the tail end of the 20th century. A broader dimension lies within. It is not philosophical per se, but certainly one that explores attitudes towards life, companions, and the greater world. No matter whether those relationships are grounded in Põltsamaa, New Zealand, or Colorado. Moreover, the tone is upbeat, and almost every page offers amusement. Even if the laughter sometimes makes you cry. A quality of fine literature.

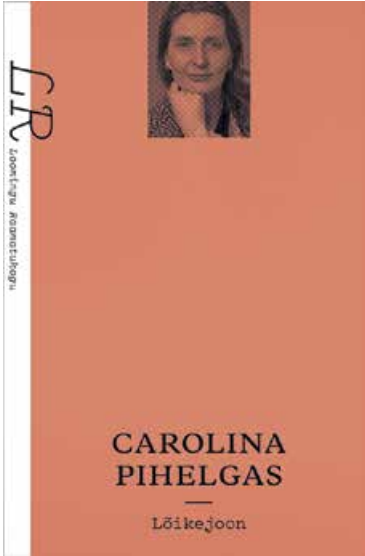
I put on Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Bygone times, tears in your eyes, a few bits that make you laugh... Urmas Vadi doesn't take himself too seriously, which is precisely what lends him credibility. Undoubtedly, he is one of our day's most significant Estonian prose writers.

Karl-Martin Sinijärv (b. 1971) is an Estonian journalist and poet.

URMAS VADI /

photo Georg Savisaar, ERR / Scanpix Baltics





CAROLINA PHELGAS

Lõikejoon

Cutting Line

Loomingu Raamatukogu 1-2/2024, 96 pp.

ISBN 4741231022534

Review by Maximilian Murmann

Carolina Pihelgas' second novel, *Cutting Line*, revolves around the inner life of a young woman named Liine who has recently ended an abusive, toxic relationship. Liine retreats to an old cottage in South Estonia to sort out her thoughts and feelings, but how can one reflect on oneself when the world is falling apart? The book, set in the near future, is filled with vivid and beautiful depictions of a nature that is acutely threatened by extinction, an extinction not only caused by climate change but also by drought and heat. No less threatening is the presence of a massive military base close to the cottage, which is ever-expanding. While Liine tries to recover from 14 years of violence, she can hear explosions and shots from the "polygon," where

the world's largest military alliance is practicing for an attack. It is a harrowing soundtrack one cannot get accustomed to and a potent metaphor for the war inside the protagonist. The war machinery only stops on Midsummer, when Liine is joined by her mother and sister, who will not understand her woes. Instead, Liine finds solace in letters belonging to her great-aunt Elvi, the previous cottage owner. Although Liine has no clear memories of Elvi, she senses a strong connection to her. In this way, *Cutting Line* picks up on the leitmotif of Pihelgas' first novel, *Watching the Night*, a book about personal roots and transgenerational trauma. Only by coming to terms with one's roots is it possible to find a way forward.

Like her previous novel, *Cutting Line* consists of poetic fragments

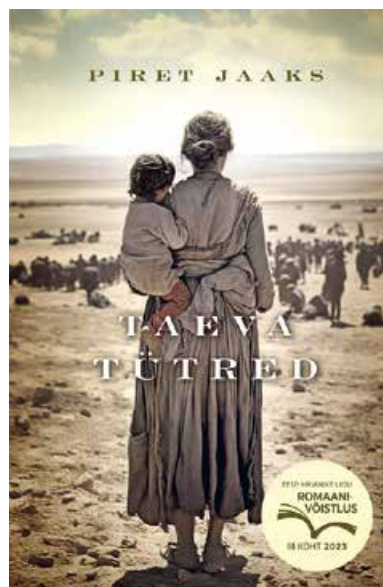
CAROLINA PHELGAS / photo Kris Moor



with many details, observations, and reflections. Thanks to its short chapters and clear structure, which limits itself to the essence of Liine's liberation process, it is more accessible than the author's previous work. Although Liine is focused on what is happening inside her, reading *Cutting Line* is nearly a physical experience. As summer unfolds, nature sets the rhythm for Liine, who works in the garden—chopping wood, weeding, and sowing—and while her environment changes, Liine herself undergoes profound changes. Likewise, there is a shift from Liine's sinister language at the beginning of the book to a clairvoyant, self-determined voice towards the end.

Cutting Line is a book about boundaries—personal and natural, spatial and temporal. It is fascinating to see how these boundaries are shifting and merging. In less than one hundred pages, Carolina Pihelgas creates a depth that would perhaps not be possible without her poetic language, upon which she builds her rendering of the human soul. With this extraordinary little book, the poet undoubtedly reinforces her position as one of Estonia's greatest prose writers today.

Maximilian Murmann (b. 1987) is a translator of Estonian and Finnish literature.



PIRET JAAKS

Taeva tütre

Daughters of the Sky

Varrak, 2023, 272 pp.

ISBN 9789985358993

Review by *Silvia Urgas*

Although *Daughters of the Sky* is Piret Jaaks's debut novel, she is in no way a beginner. In addition to publishing a collection of short stories that won the Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature, Jaaks, who has a doctoral degree in theater, is an awarded playwright whose works are performed frequently. Perhaps even more noteworthy than *Daughters of the Sky* winning third place in the Estonian Writers' Union's novel-writing competition, it is a book that people are reading and actively discussing. Though it was published just last autumn, a second print has already gone into circulation, which is rare for contemporary Estonian fiction.

A significant part of Jaaks's childhood was spent in the town of

Haapsalu, similar to my own. Yet, it was only after reading *Daughters of the Sky* that I learned an interesting detail: Haapsalu was also where the protagonist Anna Hedvid Büll grew up in a house that is now home to Ilon's Wonderland—a center dedicated to illustrator Ilon Wickland, who was born just one street away. More familiar to me was the *khachkar*, or Armenian cross-stone, that in 2014 was erected on Haapsalu's seaside promenade as a memorial to Büll. That was probably the first time I heard about the Baltic German missionary and Haapsalu native who rescued hundreds of Armenian children from certain death.

The novel features switchbacks of Büll's early life, from Haapsalu to St. Petersburg to Germany, however, its main focus is on her mission in the city of Marash. In present-day Turkey, Marash was home to tens of thousands of Armenians in the early 20th century. The author paints Büll, referred to by her preferred middle name Hedvid, more as an angel than a human—a perfect and wholly good extension of the hand of God, whose singular motivating force is a desire to help. Although this does leave the protagonist somewhat one-dimensional (no one can be so perfect!), no part of the Christian historical figure's actual biography, spanning nearly 100 years, gives any reason to believe the opposite. Using Büll's life as a conduit, the book explores humanity more than any particular character and home as a conceptual place in one's heart to which you can always return.

Having mastered the art of conjuring scenes and atmospheres in the theater, Jaaks sets *Daughters of the Sky* in motion by cinematically

transporting the reader to Armenian villages in the 1910s. It practically begs for screen adaptation. The novel brims with beauty, simple childlike playfulness, and drowsily routine chores. These aspects only amplify the brutality of its later descriptions of genocide and the manner in which the bloodbaths indiscriminately (or incredibly discriminately, targeting the Armenian ethnicity and faith) lay waste to lives and places that just became so dear. The book has no happy ending, staying true to the historical reality and serving as a painful reminder to small nations that exist next to large, aggressive countries.

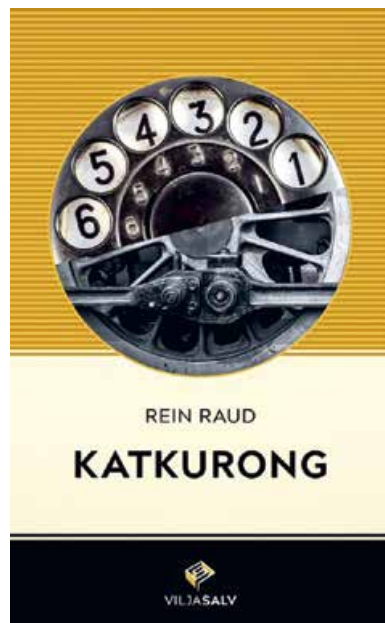
PIRET JAAKS / photo Heiko Kruusi /
Õhtuleht / Scanpix Baltics



Jaaks also draws bold parallels between the Armenians' tragic fate and Büll's own inability to spend her final days in her precious family home because of Russian occupation.

If you ever find yourself in Haapsalu, then it's worth at least strolling past the house at 5 Kooli Street and thinking about Anna Büll and Ilon Wikland, both brave Haapsalu women whose childhoods in the seaside resort town, any person's dream, couldn't save them from being swept up in wars and whirlwinds caused by powerful regimes, but who still never abandoned children and the principles of humanity in the face of such terrible cruelty. Yet, before the reader can turn the final page and conclude that Estonia's gift to the world has only been rosy and good, Jaaks reminds us that the Estonian state still has not recognized the Armenian genocide. A cursory glance at any online news outlet shows that today, just as much as in 1915, we still need sympathy, self-sacrifice, and the courage to call events by their proper name.

Silvia Urgas (b. 1992) is a writer and lawyer whose debut poetry collection Siht/koht won the 2016 Betti Alver Award for Debut Literature.



REIN RAUD

Katurong
Plague Train

Salv, 2023, 254 pp.

ISBN 9789916981146

Review by Tiina Pai

Rein Raud's success as a writer is equal to that of his illustrious academic career. Poetry, short prose, novels, translations—his creative tenure spans over 40 years and includes many works and much-esteemed recognition. However, Raud is best known to the public for his novels, in which he ties philosophy to historical fiction while offering a generous dose of suspense and insight into the most shadowy corners of the human soul.

Plague Train is set in two time-lines: 1911 and 1933. Jakob Sarapik is an Estonian conscript in the Imperial Russian Army. The intelligent young man graduates from the Military Medical Academy as a field surgeon

and is dispatched to Manchuria to handle the consequences of a plague outbreak. As one might expect, the mission has a deep impact on his life. But when employed as a medic at Patarei Prison in Tallinn twenty years later, Jakob still hasn't lost his remarkable ability to gently shape the fates of those around him.

The novel's characters and historical context are natural and credible with outstanding precision. Every scene is equally realistic and sprinkled with historical details, such as the brands of candies popular in 1933 Estonia or the appetizers offered to a Manchurian military commander. It is this equality when describing things both near and far, Estonian and foreign, that allows readers to be truly present in the novel and not wonder how things might have been. Raud obviously engaged in the research with gusto, as the historical environment and its incredible diapason in no way feel strained.

Regardless of how engaging Raud's faithful historical accounts might be, the novel's most compelling aspect is its depiction of the characters' inner thoughts and emotions. Two primary impulses spark the chain of events and give it momentum: chance and a longing for freedom. Every important event is a consequence of fate and is influenced either physically or mentally by closed environments, or rather the characters' attempts to break free of them.

Although the distances the young field surgeons traverse appear limitless, the plague train itself is a closed institution both physically and in terms of its restrictive rules. Jakob's instructor, Yevdokimov, anticipates the problems and needs that could

arise in that micro-society. He composed the team of various personalities and backgrounds to the best of his abilities and assigned each young man a certain role.

The clash of ethics and philosophies is particularly palpable in the relationship between Jakob and his fellow field surgeon Solomyatin, leading to the former being burdened with a vow to take revenge someday. Yet, over time, the burning desire to settle the score pales into mere obligation. When an opportunity to carry it out is suddenly revealed, it upends the protagonist's life and binds him in moral dilemmas. Having already lost property and opportunities, Jakob is already a prisoner of circumstances at Patarei, and the inner deadlock only makes the otherwise even-tempered man unpredictable.

Solomyatin, who disregards all laws and human boundaries, is a tempestuous force that especially longs for freedom. It is an inherent

REIN RAUD / photo Siim Lõvi, ERR / Scanpix Baltics



quality: total liberation is his ideal, and he only acts according to whims and personal well-being. When the man's path leads to Patarei as an inmate and intersects with Jakob's once again, it gives the author a chance to show him in full honesty—as a sociopath. Solomyatin would take death over imprisonment.

The secondary characters' stories also give cause to consider the price of freedom: eremite Onissim and the colorful women Liza and Zina are just a few who endeavor to break through boundaries set by society and their circumstances.

The combination of chance and a longing for freedom also underpin the book's conclusion. What happens when both the perpetrator and the target of revenge yearn for the same thing, albeit for different reasons? Is it better to stoop to a criminal's level or to abandon and betray your vow?

Tiina Pai (b. 1978) is a terminologist who has studied the Hungarian language, literature, and political science. She has written literary reviews since the early 2000s in addition to poetry and a novel titled *Conversations with Another Tiger* (EKSA 2021). Pai resides in Luxembourg.



MARGUS HAAV

Hundiema ühepajatoidu saladus *The Wolf Mother's Secret Recipe*

Illustrated by Tuulike Kivestu-Rotella

Koolibri, 2023, 64 pp.

ISBN 9789985050699

Review by *Jaanika Palm*

Animals have been beloved children's book characters since time immemorial. Although it's increasingly difficult to offer anything fresh and unique in the field, countless authors still try their hand at it every single year.

The Wolf Mother's Secret Recipe is Margus Haav's debut in children's literature, having worked primarily in journalism. His animal characters are chiefly native to Estonia: bears, hedgehogs, squirrels, badgers, birds, bugs, and other small critters. But there are stories about pets, too: a dog, a cat, a mouse, a fish, and even a domesticated caterpillar and stuffed animals. The only creature from further afield is a lion named Gurrumul, who, like his namesake, Australian multi-instrumentalist and

singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, is quite the industrious creature. Gurrumul, the lion, escapes from a circus and puts together an orchestra in Bearwoods.

Haav's tales anthropomorphize the animals: a rabbit grows carrots in its garden, a snail builds a skyscraper, a badger makes compote, a cat and mouse play checkers, and more. Their environments and their problems also contain many parallels to modern human life. The collection's stories are pleasantly dissimilar while sharing a harmonious, well-planned structure: each is in the right place and contributes to a central idea. Haav stresses that although humans tend to see themselves as the center of the universe and believe they've already cracked all of nature's secrets, such a belief is still far from the truth. Animals, no matter how small, are cleverer and more skilled than we might believe. One colorful example of why humans shouldn't think so highly of themselves is given in "A Glass Eye on the Forest Animals," in which the characters embarrassingly entertain humans in front of a trail cam instead of going about their regular, busy lives. The audience has no idea that it's all for show and relishes every second the camera captures.

The Wolf Mother's Secret Recipe is dynamic and aimed squarely at its intended audience. Young readers are swept into a plot that offers excitement, prismatic nuances, and a generous dose of humor, all ending in a twist. There's no unnecessary adult-like patronizing: the author knows his young readers will pick up the bits of wisdom all on their own.

Haav's book gave illustrator Tuulike Kivestu-Rotella a wonderful



MARGUS HAAV / photo Marko Saarm, Sakala / Scanpix Baltics

opportunity to let her imagination soar, and it seems like such fun fantasies are her forte. Using the author's rich, humorous details, the artist breathed life into the characters. Her application of nature's infrequently used color spectrum is particularly praiseworthy, which perfectly fits the nature-inspired stories.

Jaanika Palm (b. 1973) is a researcher at the Estonian Children's Literature Center.



ANTI SAAR
Kuidas istuda, kuidas astuda
How to Sit, How to Stand

Illustrated by Alvar Jaakson
 KOLM ELU, 2023, 112 pp.
 ISBN 9789916983218

*Winner of the 2024 Cultural Endowment of
 Estonia's Prize for Children's Literature*

Review by Jaanika Palm

At first glance, Anti Saar's *How to Sit, How to Stand* is a simple handbook or self-help guide in which he shares detailed advice on how to better navigate life.

As a warmup, Saar breaks down the seemingly basic acts of sitting, standing, and walking – in which, as he demonstrates, there are countless opportunities for mistakes. This evolves into increasingly complex challenges: how to tie your shoes, write a letter, speak to other children, survive without a phone, stifle laughter, and so on. By the end of the book, he addresses true conundrums, such as how to find your way home, make someone else happy, and be happy yourself.

Saar shares his tips with upbeat humor. His occasional deep dives into detail create a pleasant undertone, while other times, he employs frankness to pick apart an indirect thought. Although the chapters are spirited and bring out a chuckle (if not outright laughter), Saar doesn't joke for joking's sake—rather, deeper meaning always lies somewhere beneath the seemingly carefree episodes. Some parts of Saar's writing could be labeled as social critique, though his softness and good intentions keep one from applying such a strong label. Saar is a more inventive prodder than a harsh critic. The way he conveys values with warmth and sincerity (and not the slightest pity) is endearing—values that glow in casually scattered sentences like “the

ANTI SAAR / photo Kris Moor



way home is probably the most precious thing you could ever lose” and “no one cries if they don’t care.” Even so, the book is filled with sarcastic jabs, the sharpest of which are directed toward carelessness, self-centeredness, and a lack of compassion.

How to Sit, How to Stand branches out nicely. It references real-life events, broader societal topics (such as food couriers, climate catastrophe, and lactose intolerance), and other books and films (Dale Carnegie, Cressida Cowell). But despite the sweeping range of allusions, Saar’s writing remains coherent, light, and easy to read, both to oneself and out loud.

Alvar Jaakson’s comics-style illustrations are accurately labeled “figures”. They are primarily in black and

white with tones of orange, yellow, and other cheerful colors for added zest. The pictures play different parts in different stories. Some chapters only have a handful, while others are presented with detailed diagrams (“How to Confess Mischief”) or almost entirely comprised of drawings (“How to Tame a Dragon”, “How to Be Happy”). No matter the ratio of words to illustrations, they always form a pleasant whole that will bring a smile to readers of any age while also provoking prickly thoughts—all in all, a nice little textual hedgehog.

Jaanika Palm (b. 1973) is a researcher at the Estonian Children’s Literature Center.



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