



Rights guide

V.B.Z. Literary Prize
for the Best Unpublished
Novel 2002 – 2019

V.B.Z.

V.B.Z. is a publisher, bookseller and distributor from Croatia with independent companies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Serbia. Just like large European publishers, V.B.Z. asserted itself by publishing the widest range of editions. From the founding of the company in 1991, V.B.Z. has published more than 1700 titles, mostly the works of the most appreciated Croatian and foreign writers of today.

In 2002 V.B.Z. founded literary prize for the best unpublished novel that promotes young authors from the region. The contest was organized at the V.B.Z.'s initiative with the aim of increasing interest for prose writing and prose reading in Croatia. During a period of more than ten years of its existence this contest has become one of the most important literary contests and cultural events in this part of the world. Moreover, it has a prize with the biggest prize fond for cultural achievements in Croatia and region. A large media interest for this literary prize is a result of two key points – an exceptional prize fond of HRK 100.000 which makes it the biggest prize fond in the Croatian culture in general, and the fact that the contest is anonymous, which promotes the principle of equality. The writers who have won at the Contest so far, and whose novels were elected among more than a hundred manuscripts – that

many arrive for the Contest every year, have been given excellent reviews from the professionals from the public life as well as a good reception of readers from this part of the world.

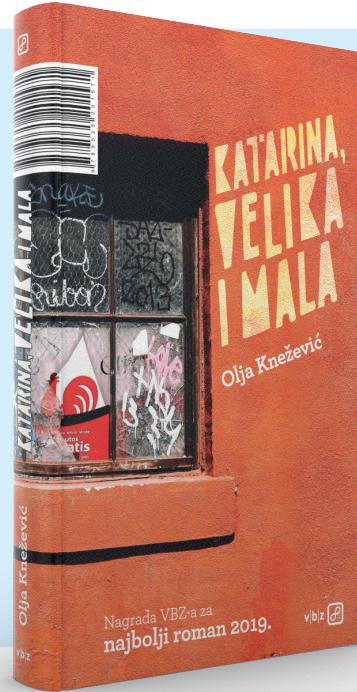
Since 2008 V.B.Z. has been one of the organizers of the Authors and Books Festival held annually in the city of Rijeka at the Adriatic coast. The vRIsak (scReam) festival managed to gain regional character with guest authors from Slovenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Hungary, Albania, as well as from all around Europe, from Finland, Romania, Bulgaria.

In 2012, V.B.Z. initiated the publication of the series of books "The Best of Croatian Literature" – translations of classic and best contemporary Croatian fiction into European languages.

V.B.Z. editorial department has always paid special attention to the choice of translators of high quality fiction and has always made sure that translation of such fiction is of the highest quality – as the original. The translators who translate literary fiction V.B.Z. publishes are all members of the Croatian Association of Literary Translators, well-known translators, professionals in their field, many teaching at the University of Humanities in Zagreb. V.B.Z.'s editors and language editors also take special care of the text translated ensuring the highest possible quality.



v|b|z ZAGREB



...Catherine, the Great and the Small by Olja Knežević is the year's 2019 recipient of VBZ best novel award, and a most intriguing novel, whose prose neither lulls readers into vapid optimism, nor escapes into trendy activism. It is a deep scan of relationships within families, female friendships, of love affairs and betrayals; of escaping and returning to a different milieu, as well as of the wide range of social backdrops in the context of shattering events, which (re)direct the fates of its protagonists.

The VBZ Award Panel

"...Catherine, the Great and the Small' is a page-turner, giving off the sensation that it was written in one sitting. It greatly differs from anything else written in modern Croatian prose, mostly because of the vivacity of its voice. The novel tells the story of friendship, love, betrayal, death and identity quest from the period of ex-Yugoslavia's edge of self-destruction, via Belgrade, infected with violence at the end of 1980s and during the 1990s, to the modern-day London and Montenegro, whose current

position and situation is superbly described by Knežević, a gifted, lucid and brave storyteller, and an insider. Beside the title heroine's intimately presented life path, the novel includes numerous parallel fates, written with reminiscence and self-reflection, of the children of 'communism,' betrayed by communism, and left alone, scattered throughout the world, in their new homes, from London to California, to build their new identities.

Denis Derk, Večernji list

By combining the personal with the universal, Olja Knežević has created a novel not only about the life of one woman, but about the lives of those generations, who were born and raised in one type of social system, knocked down and turned into something much more tragic, during the best and the most promising years of their youth. Knežević's novel is written with clarity, lucidity, full of good, ear-pleasing dialogue, interesting plot turns and a deftly constructed mixture of dialects from the region.

Marinko Krmpotić, Zadarski List

The novel (Catherine, the Great and the Small) is a truly seductive book, charming the readers into reading it again and again, without it losing its allure, resilient against interpretational fatigue and disappointments, which so often occur when a reader re-dives into a known material. Olja Knežević writes with courage and without missing a step, or losing a beat in the intensity of her voice. The writing is mature, sparkly with wit, at the same time dense with memory, emotion, humanity and femininity, yet written with clarity on the syntax level. Author's sharp eye



and an analytical nerve create plenty of excellent character studies, as well as the studies of relationships and social circumstances that seem to have appeared there effortlessly and inevitably, as they do in life. Catherine's story is also a love letter to Montenegro, that wild land of fatality, as she herself quickly describes it in a line of dialogue; to Montenegro, which we have felt ever so intimately, and even, at times, as our own homeland.

Vanja Kulaš, Modern Times

Catherine, the Great and the Small

Short synopsis

“I wasn’t the only one falling apart. Behind my dark walls the whole world was falling apart”, says the protagonist Katarina, while she grows from Small to Great. The streets of the capital of Montenegro suddenly become too tight so they expand into the streets of Belgrade and London. Katarina is an authentic voice which guides us along the way of disassembling and reassembling in the author’s particular style which combines the intimate and the public. From growing up in the twilight of socialism, through the hints of everything that happened to the region after that and diving into the new warlike and transitional daily life, Katarina is fragile enough and strong enough at the same time to allow herself to falter and fall into the darkest corners of the social underground and the most painful romantic and marital disasters.

Olja Knežević is a writer whose prose doesn’t lull the reader into optimism nor does it dabble with fashionable activism; she examines family relationships and tragedies, female friendships, romantic betrayals and frauds, departures and escapes, various social milieus, but also a wider social context of confusing and neuralgic events which (re)direct human destinies.

Carefully crafted characters and masterful, dynamic storytelling place “Katarina” into the company of the very best novels which speak about the reality of this area in the last few decades – the novels which we remember for their authentic, strong, maladjusted characters filled with passion – and Katarina is certainly one of them.

And when they try to make her Insignificant and when she tries to become Great, caught in a net which threatens her spirit and her body, where power and money, various political options, heritages and homelands fight for supremacy, Katarina is convincing and complex, just like life itself, just like this novel.

I am Catherine the Great, locked in a small room.

We declared the small room our study. The English call the room of this size “a broom closet.” My husband and I, every year until Christmas, before it gets really cold, claim that the English are spoiled even when they are poor. Then we see them, in swirls of wind, running around town, from one job to another, men bald, hatless, women wearing flat shoes on their bare feet, everyone gloveless, and then we remember where we came from: a small country where you don’t get out in the northern wind, where, at noon at the latest, you skip work to express your condolences and attend a funeral.

The small room became our study.

We’re going to build a new life against our heritage and mentality, my husband said. We’re not going to be lazy and weak. I agreed, even though I continued to hold the plates as if they were butterfly wings, between my thumb and index finger. Every weekend at least one slips from my fingertips – I have poor circulation – and breaks. Most often it’s a large dinner plate. The weekends are the accumulation of separateness, the lowest concentration point, the evenings without grounding in foreign cities with a much colder climate. That’s when I’ll even reach after the word “home” in my thoughts, and I miss everyone, my nana the most. When I lived at her house, she didn’t allow me to help

with the house chores. I remained clumsy in that line of work, although for a long time I couldn’t find a job of different kind in this city. Nana emerges out of me more and more often: when I fish out the dusty, half-open caramels and forgotten, mistakenly washed, crumbling banknotes from my bathrobe pocket and shove them in the hands of children who nag, nag, because they really didn’t mean that when they said they wanted something sweet nor did they have that in their minds when they asked for money to go out. Nana speaks out of me when, instead of arguing, I take a deep breath, and exhale sharply through my nostrils, “Mhm, brats,” and there she is again, at the end of the day, taking my left hand and pulling the duvet over my hip, over my back, covering me so that “my kidneys don’t wilt until the morning,” as she used to say, in place of a good night. And I call her only for her birthday or holidays important to her, the New Year’s and the First of May.

Today I didn’t clean the pieces of broken plates from the kitchen floor of our fifth apartment in the foreign land. Terrazzo Moderno, the real estate agent said, opening the kitchen door and showing us the apartment. Her pronunciation of t, r, and o tried to sound Italian, but she couldn’t hide her English. I pretended I had control over everything that was happening to me, that I would’ve too, had I been choosing, selected the same Terrazzo Modern tiles. Three bedrooms, plus a living room, with this

study lodged in the corner of a straight corridor, ninth floor, around us the vast expanse of the metropolis. Life promised nothing to anyone, all of these are gifts from heaven and I'm thankful, even though my anchor is just one lacquered, slim, tulumba-colored desk. Bent over it, I write to myself, and the members of my household make fun of it. Luxury pastime, no doubt, they say and sneer; writing memoirs – pastime worthy of an empress, of one Catherine the Great. None of them would sweep the kitchen floor.

In the city of my dreams, I don't seek adventure, I don't look for soulmates.

Catherine the Small

1

It's the beginning of the summer of 1978. The grown-ups tell us we're a fortunate generation who should be disgusted by the vengeful ambushes and slaughters, may they never happen again. And they teach us: no more eye for an eye, turn the other cheek. None of us use such words. They appear in just a few stories in the textbook. And we all stare at the puzzling expressions and can think of just one thing – "pain".

Communism, we conclude in front of our building, is the best social order in the world: it teaches you to turn a blind eye. We never read the Bible, it's banned and, besides, it has

a reputation of being boring, which Marijeta confirmed. "A book for the old folks, that's how it's written," she said. Her father is an army officer, and her mother is from Pula, Croatia, and she keeps her Bible hidden under Marijeta's winter clothes.

It's the beginning of summer and only the most hardened robbers, such as myself, hide from the cops in the stinky passage next to the pita shop, pressing against the wall all covered in piss, keeping quiet, and breathing into our palms, while all around us, in the heat, the smell of minced meat and onion grows thick, the smell that repels the enemies. The grown-ups we don't like, such as Marijeta's father, say it's cats' meat.

No, we don't say cops, it's coppers. Coppers and robbers. When grown-ups are round, we say we play cowboys and Indians. They ask us if we heard someone, when we go out or something, sing Chetnik songs. My nana asks me this, she scares me and that's why I hide the word copper from her. I don't want her to think it's another word for Chetnik. I don't know any such songs, I listen to Boney M, and my three girlfriends and I have a choreography and we dance to their music. Ra-Ra-Rasputin, Last-a-Morning-loving-she, we mess up the lyrics. I'm in love with one of the coppers, I want him to find me in the eternal darkness of the pita shop passage. If he finds me, if he sneaks up on me from behind, so that I have to

abruptly turn to face him, I'll kiss him on the mouth. So what if I'm too skinny and have a bad haircut? I know how to kiss; my pillow can vouch for it. I use everything I've got: lips, teeth, tongue, hands, hips and sighs – and as I imagine myself doing this, my body shivers: so powerful is my fantasy.

It's June, the school's out for the summer, and the earth has already cracked from the heat, it has the shape of a piece of old cheese from the farmers' market. And we tasted this earth, my friends and I, we bit into the dry soil when we were young and hungry, and now we laugh at it. Early in the afternoon, the smell of dirt blends with the smell of garbage from plastic bags piled up next to the entrances into apartment buildings, with the smell of gas from overheated cars, and with the smell of rancid pink and white oleander flowers. That's when we have lunch. Evenings bring calm, even the oleander has a gentle smell, we tell each other that the scent is a deception, the white flower must be poisonous, and we lick the flowers nevertheless, we lick the leaves too, daring the fate under the sky sprinkled with large stars that watch over us from above, they follow us, wonder and love us, just like our mothers do standing on the balconies in the neighborhood. Except that my mother is ill, she's in the hospital. No one else's family has this problem. Enisa told me this made me strange, but I only feel sick in my stomach, maybe I'm also ashamed.

I like it better when my mom is at home, even if I hear her groan and vomit, because even then she's the flood of life in my small family. When I visit her in the hospital, I can't, for example, ask her to fix my hair. Without her help my hair no longer looks like I'm going for a punk rock look. It just looks scorched. Mom's arms are greenish-yellow, as are her feet, which I know I'm not supposed to see, yet I always see them before she puts on her slippers, because she wants to sit, she tells us, not lie on the bed, while Dad and I are in the room with her. Her makeup is too strong, and she puts on her wing come visiting hours. She takes her purple bottle and sprinkles herself and her squeaky hospital bed with Yardley deodorant, to cover up the layers of the stench of her illness.

"It's good, I always recognize your happy step", she tells me, "so I clean myself up quickly. I'll need a new bottle of Yardley." She gives me a piece of checkered paper. "Here's the list of what I need." The list is unintelligible, just scribbles, the lines that scare me, the arrows aiming at my eyes. Dad stands behind me, he can see there are no real words on the paper, and he squeezes my shoulder with his meaty hand, it's a signal to keep quiet.

"But won't you come home soon?" I ask her. "May dance is soon. We're putting together a dance routine to one of Boney M song. I'm that man from the band. I took your white hat,

and Aunty Mela tailored Dad's white summer pants to fit me."

Mom waves her hand, her greenish-yellow hand. "I'm so sorry," she says. She doesn't think she'll come out of the hospital by then. "Let Mela make you an afro before the dance, she knows how. Well done for the part."

"Marto from the green building is the only one who knows the moves. He taught me. His dad didn't allow him to dance with us."

My dad laughs at this, and my mother hugs me, she wants me to sit down next to her. What makes her happy is that I haven't become a sick mother's child, she tells my father, they made me into a special young girl, strong, she adds and kisses me, but she doesn't know I'm disgusted by her hospital bed, that room filled with needles and tubes, gauze wraps and cotton swabs covered in pus and blood; a sharp smell of medicinal line between life and death fills my nostrils.

I didn't know I was losing my mother forever, no one explained it to me, I picked up bits and pieces here and there, only the information that concerned me directly, such as whether she would still be at the hospital when I would

be packing for the youth holiday home in Sutomore, because, in that case, I would not pack that ugly sweater with buttons on the front, black and old-lady-like, which my mother, because of its bat-like sleeves, called hippie and claimed it was good for the evening, in the summer. It took me a long time to forgive myself those hospital visits when I sulked, bragged, and kissed her only when she insisted because I was supposedly late for a rehearsal or my friends were waiting for me in front of the building to play. She was the reason why I had to pass the seventh grade with all As, that's what my father told me. She might not see the junior graduation, he added, then took out a red-and-white pack out of his shirt pocket, lit a cigarette, and gazed into the distance. Tell me, I wanted to shout, explain it to me, what does this "might" of yours mean? What percentage is that? Because Mom is so young. Why couldn't she break free from the illness and escape, she, the happiest and youngest of all of my girlfriends' moms? How did she end up in a hospital room shared with old women some of which even quickly go home because all they have is pneumonia?

Olja Knežević

Olja Knežević was born and raised in Montenegro, went to school in California and received her degree in English language and literature from the University of Belgrade in Serbia.

She also has an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck College, London, where was awarded an Overall Prize for the best MA Creative Writing dissertation of the year 2008. That dissertation grew into the novel *Milena & Other Social Reforms*, which ended up being published first in Montenegro, then in Croatia. Knežević has been awarded the V.B.Z. Award for the Best Unpublished Novel in 2019 for her work *Katarina, Velika i Mala* (*Catherine, the Great and Small*). She currently lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

World rights available for "Catherine, the Great and the Small"
Originally published by V.B.Z., 2019

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MARINA ŠUR PUHLOVSKI *Wild Woman* (*Divljakuša*)

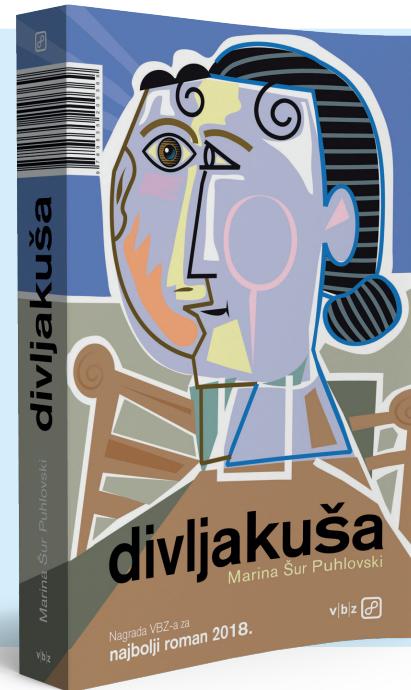
Wild Woman (Divljakuša)

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Written in long, but clear sentences, with well-defined characters and exquisite sense for detail, the novel *Wild Woman* is a worthy contribution to our [Croatian] contemporary prose, a work which transforms touching dramatics of delicate interpersonal feeling into strong linguistic art.

V.B.Z. Award Jury Citation



Describing about seven years of Sofija Kralj's youth, Marina Šur Puhlovski very knowledgeably tackles and depicts the family frescos of two Croatian families in a much wider period than mere seven years. She puts them in the context of a tumultuous historical times without getting political, with a lot of coldblooded and indisputable statements, but also with a ladylike amount of humour which some would maybe dub gallows humour. Because this is a gallows novel.

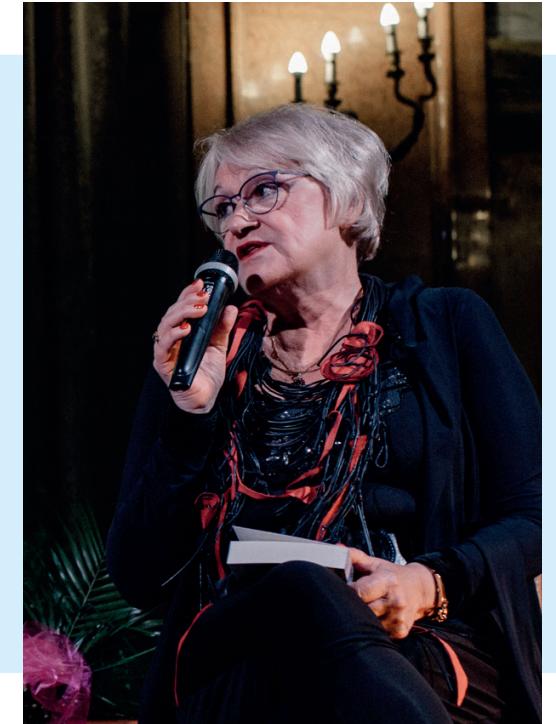
Denis Derk, Večernji list

But since she [Marina Šur Puhlovski] has very successfully delved into her antiheroine's psychological and emotional world, she has actually managed to make a psychological and emotional analysis of the process of a nineteen-year old falling in love and a mature young woman in her mid-twenties falling out of love. Although Šur Puhlovski uses long and complicated sentences rich in content, her storytelling is fluent, clear and interesting, as she gradually reveals insights about the doom of the described marriage bond.

Marinko Krmpotić, Novi list

I dedicated the novel to my daughter, and through her to all women, because it is a novel about the liberation of a woman, about the "birth" of a woman in our times. Women are raised believing in fairy tales about the world where princes await them, but the princes went extinct long ago... This novel is the end of that fairy tale – and my only novel with a happy ending. I wrote it in one breath, after "cooking" it for two years. It formed and then it was literally "born". I have never written anything so easily.

Marina Šur Puhlovski on *Wild Woman*



The novel's greatest value lies in its polished style built on the base of colloquial idiom with its dynamic and lively sentences which invite reading and refer to Sofija Kralj Vidović's constant adventure and desire for life more than the plot itself. In a string of novels which are part of the so-called "women's writing" with its brave female protagonists, *Divljakuša* stands out with its entwining of tragic pain and wittiness...

Mira Muhoberac, Vijenac

In the not so distant past people also had the urge to disappear from their lives for a longer or shorter period of time, about which the winner of V.B.Z.'s award Marina Šur Puhlovski writes so splendidly in a kind of anti-love novel *Divljakuša* set in the seventies. As you can guess, the story begins idyllically, the heroine meets and falls in love with a genius guy in college, they go to a sea town together, and in Pula for the first time she encounters the phenomenon called 'when a guy leaves to get cigarettes'...

Aleksandra Orlić, Cosmopolitan

Wild Woman*Short synopsis*

Marina Šur Puhlovski's *Divljakuša* (*Wild Woman*) has been awarded one of the most important literary awards in Croatia "Best Unpublished Novel of the Year Award" for 2018, and has also been a finalist of the "Fran Galović Award" in 2018 and has been shortlisted for the "Fric Award".

The novel, set in the 1970s in Zagreb and Rijeka, follows a heroine from a poor family over the course of seven years. Her father is ill and retired and her mother a dominant woman who always protects the interests of men. The heroine falls in love and marries a fellow literature student who comes from a similar social milieu and has a dysfunctional family. Enamored with his offbeat appearance, wit and artistic sensibilities, she moves with her husband to another town.

However, what at first to a young woman in love seemed idyllic soon becomes a nightmare as she becomes the victim of an unscrupulous eccentric and a lazy womanizer whom she must support financially and who often disappears without explanation, leaving her alone in unfamiliar surroundings. To free herself from him, she must free herself from the "prison" in which she was put by her family, new community, tradition... She must go wild. *Wild Woman* is a story about a woman who is not only an outsider in the world she lives in, but an outsider in her own life. It is a story about "a life which is slipping through one's fingers", about a life "in which one is not present" but constantly thinking about how to escape from it.

I'd already noticed him, he'd already caught my eye at the first lecture, in the huge lecture hall, the college amphitheatre, with its semi-circular rows of benches, and down below, in the middle, a table called a lectern, and behind the lectern a green board to write on. I noticed him when I briefly turned around to see who was sitting behind me, I always turn around, because I can, and he was leaning against the wall by the door, tall, thin, all bones, nice looking but nothing special, I decided, glued to my bench as I turned back to face the lectern. The lecture hadn't started yet, the students were still settling down in their seats. So I turned around again to get a better view, and he was still there, leaning against the wall by the door, exceedingly fair-skinned, which I didn't like, his hair thin and lank, like mine, which I didn't like either, the only thing I did like was that he had dark hair, but standing next to him now was another guy of the same height but much healthier-looking, he was more the athletic type, he didn't look tired, or melancholic, or tubercular as they used to say before tuberculosis was eradicated, with thick fair hair that had no intention of falling out, but for who knows what reason I rated less attractive than the first one.

They gave no sign of wanting to sit down, like the rest of us, they doggedly stood their ground by the door, as if intending to run off, because I could envisage them opening their mouths, waving their arms, nodding, laughing,

as if they knew each other from before (and, as I was later to find out, they did, they went to the same high school, there was a two-year age difference), and I was slightly jealous that they had each other, compared to me, I knew nobody there, everybody was a stranger, and I was one of those people who didn't know how to bridge the gulf between two bodies with the ease of a smile, I'd accept a smile but wouldn't give one, and as a result I was the person always sitting on a chair in the corner whom nobody approached.

Admittedly, one student did approach me, all fair and blond and bearded, he introduced himself as Adam, but two girls, smiling ear to ear, immediately dragged him away, as if they owned him, and as there was nothing for it, he shrugged his shoulders and disappeared.

Meanwhile, the double act disappeared as well - I saw that when I turned around again, at the end of the lecture, and I decided that they were rude. That they had some nerve. That they had no respect. They had come to study something wonderful and lofty like literature, not technology, economics, medicine or law - so boring you wanted to die, just thinking of the syllabus was enough to make you go numb, but they had scuttled out like rats caught stealing. I wrote them off right away, but they reappeared on the evening of the same day, and stayed. And so I felt more kindly disposed. Amazingly, they kept coming

regularly, in the morning and in the evening, with the other one taking notes, like me; but mine guy didn't, he didn't even carry a notebook with him, ignoramus, I thought, but I didn't hold it against him.

I usually went to classes with Flora, my neighbour and childhood friend, who was studying English and History, and we often waited for each other after lectures; we talked about boys, and soon also about the double act, because she had noticed them too, especially him. I also got to know two or three other girls, one of them, Petra from Kutina, ambushed me on the tram, I think you're the most interesting person at uni, she said out of the blue, and would I like to hang out with her? Of course, I answered, what else could I say, flattered, but also surprised by her manner, by the way she belittled herself, I'd never do that, I thought to myself. I met the other one first; Filip: he introduced himself before a lecture, my guy wasn't there and I was with Petra, who immediately glued herself to him, and I thought, never mind, I'm not interested in him anyway.

For a while I vacillated, yes I do want him, no I don't, some things attracted me, others put me off; his eyes were big and blue, like forget-me-nots, but when you looked into them they weren't warm, they were cold, like blue ice; you're going to melt that ice, I said to myself, always stupidly believing in my own power to

change things, as I know now but didn't then; his regular features gave him a beautiful profile, but when you looked at him en face, one side of his face seemed to overshadow the other, like bad over good, or the other way round; his legs were too short for his body, but at least he had no fat on him, I didn't like them chubby, and then there was that odd walk, tottering, sluggish, he shuffled along like a sixty-year old, his shoulders stooped, all he needed was a tail like the Pink Panther, I thought, checking him out in the university corridors, in the café, outside, on the way home, in those wonderful days before anything happened.

In the invisible, I was attracted by the very things that put me off, the look that needed softening, the smile that needed coercing, and then the weariness, especially the weariness, with its hint of something tragic, of the predetermined downfall of the novel's hero, he exuded an unhappiness that needed soothing, a pain that needed easing, a wound that needed healing, it was all written there in his eyes and on his brow, especially on his pale, high brow... Suddenly he became gorgeous.

In the visible, nothing had happened, except that our eyes would meet, collide, avoid each other, underestimate each other, overestimate each other, working surreptitiously, spinning a web that you'd be caught in, and weren't counting on. That day I was powerful, prancing around in a new dress, a striking maxi,

and offered a choice, which one do you want, this one or that one, but by tomorrow I'd be helpless, everything would be slipping out of my hands, as if the previous day had never happened.

If you don't want him, I do, Flora says as we walk home together one day, it's so out of the blue that I'm startled, the kiss of death to my power, but I'm also stung, because, what the hell, somebody is prepared to snatch him away, just waiting for you to take your paws off him so that she can pounce; so he has to be protected, and that from somebody who, when you were kids, became your blood sister as a proof of ever-lasting friendship; even if you hadn't wanted him, you do now, you don't want him snatched away from you, you're not generous, you're selfish, and that's something you'll have to pay for, starting with valuing him more than he deserves. And that immediately sharpens your senses, you see something you may not have noticed in your previous role as queen, which is that suddenly his mind is elsewhere, he's in a hurry, ignoring you with a bleak look as he rushes off, he doesn't even come to the lectures anymore... Disaster, horrible; what's happened, you ask your rival of only yesterday who shrugs her shoulders, no idea, she says; so it's true, you tremble inwardly, because you were expecting her to try to persuade you otherwise. She finds it odd, too, she says, still cutting you with her knife; all that interest I showed in him and nothing, he never even

approached me - she tells me indifferently, not realising that she's hurting me - nothing except for that something in the corner of his departing eye, I say to myself, but not aloud, because it's pathetic to grasp at such straws when somebody is ignoring you.

Well, now you're in a position to grasp at what's allegedly been caught, which upsets you and keeps you awake, you wait day and night for the moment when you'll see him again and catch that something in the corner of his departing eye, your stomach knots when you unexpectedly run into him in your neighbourhood, and you immediately think it's no accident, you are the reason why he's here, although it's a busy street, and so an ordinary hello becomes an event of universal magnitude which you take to bed with you and all atremble dissect it down to the smallest detail, looking for hidden messages that work in your favour, what he said, how he looked at you, was he flustered, did he turn around to look at you, and by morning you've gone completely crazy, your chemical make-up has changed, you're incapable of judging, of separating the wheat from the chaff, ready to eat the chaff as if it were wheat, until it poisons you to death. That's what happens if you fall in love with love, with the possibility of love, with the perfect setting, like the kind found in books that men don't read, like in *The Witch of Grič*, for instance, whose instalments I still keep in the storage compartment of the sofa, if you fall in love with the unreal which will

never be confirmed by reality, because it can't be. Because it doesn't belong to it.

There's also the other side of things, hidden behind the visible, the other story, which unfolds before your eyes, the other one's story which you don't know, because you know only your own story, you imagine the other's only in relation to your own, beyond that the other's is empty and you imagine yourself filling that void, just as I imagined it when I ran into him in my neighbourhood and he was flustered. He even blushed as if he had been caught on a secret assignment, following me, as if we didn't see each other at uni, where we could have settled everything, but didn't, as if he hadn't simply said hello and moved on, but rather had taken advantage of the opportunity. He's shy, the nineteen-year-old idiot decided, dancing home to dream of the future, while he rushed off to a small afternoon party at a nearby flat, to his thirty-five-year-old mistress, he later confessed, who had a tail at the end

of her rump, a stunted tail; imagine, she's got a tail several centimetres long, he said with a mocking laugh, taking demonic pleasure in somebody else's deformity, I should have left him as soon as he said that, it was so indiscreet, and he loved it.

But I didn't. Something inside me prickled, something went dark, something shrank and went cold, and then finished up with a sheet thrown over it, like unused furniture that's covered to protect it from the dust. I started building my room for the unspoken, un-discussed comments I kept to myself afraid that talking about them would force me to draw conclusions. And then to act in accordingly, which was the hardest to do, which was why these comment rooms were created in the first place, so as not to have to act. Until the room filled to bursting point, and life boiled down to one single comment, ending with the word: enough!

Marina Šur Puhlovski

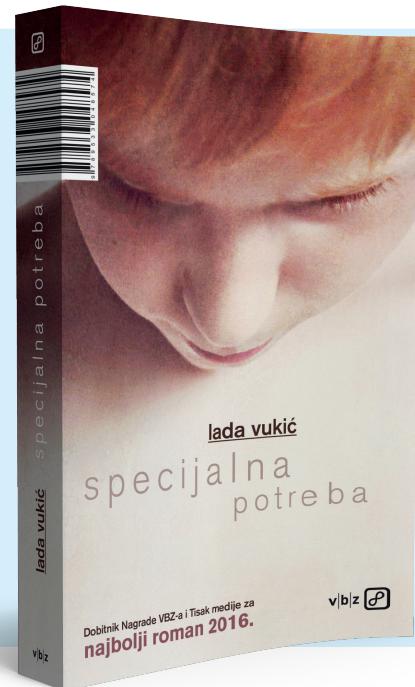
Marina Šur Puhlovski was born in Zagreb where she attended high school and graduated with a degree in comparative literature and philosophy from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. In her youth she was a journalist and a literary critic, but later turned to writing prose exclusively. She writes stories, novels, travelogues, essays and literary diaries.

She has won several awards for her short stories (such as the "Večernji list" award and the "Književni krug Karlovac" award) and the "Zvane Črnja" award for best book of essays in 2015. She has written six novels *Trojanska kobila* (1991), *Ništarija* (1999), *Nesanica* (2007), *Ljubav* (2010), *Igrač* (2017) and *Divljakuša* (2018). She lives in Zagreb as an independent artist.

World rights available for "Wild Woman"
Originally published by V.B.Z., 2018

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Courageously written novel which enables us to hear an authentic and completely unique voice, the voice of a boy who is quite different from others and who, with the most diverse worlds in his head, simply cannot fit into the world around him.

V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Jury Citation



The story about Emil is emotional and dark since it focuses not only on this special boy, but on Croatian society as well, represented by the teacher and the school, the drug dealer Emil comes in contact with, the blind professor, the mother's sister and her husband and many other secondary characters.

Jagna Pogačnik, HRT

The story about Emil and his mother, who earns by selling Christmas decorations on a stand in the cold, is primarily a story about heart, but devoid of pathos; the luxury of emotions is superiorly demonstrated here, and not only of emotions, but rather of entirety of the world. It is fascinating how Lada Vukić succeeds in describing reality and she knows how to do it. How does the average life in Croatia look? Like that. But on the other hand, nothing in this novel is average, just like Emil is not average, even though he keeps saying he is.

Tanja Tolić, najbolj knjige.com

I have to say that writing this novel would be impossible without personal experience. Indeed, the main character is made up, but he is based on several real people from my immediate surroundings. It would be absolutely impossible to write the entire novel from the boy's perspective without knowing how those different minds work. The background for discussing this topic was always there. It offered itself to me and I could not evade it, even if I wanted to. All it needed was rearrangement and incorporation of fiction.

Lada Vukić on *Special Need*



I love books written from a child's point of view. That is why the ten-year-old Emil in this novel has gotten under my skin. The last similar book I have read is "The Miracle" ("Čudo"). If you have read "The Miracle" then you know what I am talking about.

Alis Marić, Čitaj knjigu

I think that people are mostly unaware of their problems. And they know more about other people's problems than their own", says Emil Vidić, the protagonist of the novel "Special Need" by Lada Vukić. This sentence sums up rather well the basic premise of this award-winning novel.

Bonislav Kamenjašević, Zihor

"Special Need" is a masterfully written novel, deep and measured, located in a very close and recognizable world and environment with everyday occurrences and people. You know how book covers always feature songs of praise, and once you start reading the book you soon realize you have been lied to? On this book cover it says it is a brave and deeply moving text which makes us better people after we read it. This time it is true.

Ante Kolanović, Zadar City Library

Special Need

Short synopsis

Special Need is a novel that affirms something authentically human in us. A brave and deeply moving text written in a way that makes us better people when we are reading it.

The main character of the novel *Special Need* is a 10-year-old boy Emil who lives with his mother in a rented apartment in an unnamed part of town. The single mother struggles making ends meet even though she works a lot. She gives all her love to her son, who has leg problems and suffers from mutism (spoken communication disorder), and she fights to socialize him in an unfavorable environment in the best possible way. In a very well-written and precise story about a handicapped boy who encounters lack of understanding and empathy at every step, especially at school, there is also a short-lived romantic adventure, dramatic breakups between characters, unusual encounters with a drug dealer, philosophical contemplations of an old blind professor and a competition between him and Emil in listening to murmurs.

Emil has a condition which psychiatrists call selective mutism and mostly occurs during childhood: the boy communicates normally with certain people, while in communication with others he displays complete or partial mutism. Emil's mother and uncle are the ones trying to alleviate the situation; while she tries to do it through love and trust, the uncle offers a rational solution. He thinks that in this case everything revolves around closeness, trust and the approach Emil needs. Jakov gives him time to understand that he wishes him well and that he "likes him just the way he is, because he is special and different". The characters' reactions to Emil's specific condition – reactions which are polarized and motivated for different reasons, from social, psychological, religious to character reasons and others – are used to build the drama around the novel's main character. In the end, despite all the troubles he has gone through in the meantime, can Emil see the solution to his problems?

1. Garbage

My name is Emil and I am ten years old. I also have that many fingers when I count them one by one. I put my hands under the desk so nobody can see them and then I count. I don't know what will happen when I am eleven. Not fingers, but years. How will I count then? The teacher says fingers have nothing to do with counting. You think with your head, not fingers. This is the only way I know how to deal with numbers. But I know how to describe the number eleven. It is two ones standing next to each other. Like two Emil's with their heads down. Like most of my grades in school.

On Saturdays there is no school so I have plenty of time to exercise. These exercises are not designed for the body and they will not give me a bunch of muscles. I am pretty sure of that. I have been doing them for a long time, but nothing is happening. My shirt and pants sag the same way as before. Mom calls these exercises social skills. At first, I was always doing them with my slippers on; soft, warm and quiet Velcro slippers. I would spend a lot of time having fun with the Velcro. In fact I never stopped doing it. It makes a magnificent sound, like dry leaves squashed under your fingers. I do this until the Velcro becomes loose and there is no more sound. Mom always gets

mad about that. Not about the lost sound, but ruined slippers.

For some time now she forbids me to wear them during Saturday exercises. Now I wear shoes with which she refuses to help me the same way as she did before. She says I have to do it on my own and without anyone's help. It's for my own good. This is why putting them on and tying them can take a while. My newest shoes do not have Velcro, only plain and noiseless shoelaces. It can take a lot of time to tie them in a decent knot. Most of the time it's futile. It's good that mom always tells me: "Never mind, it will be better next time. Nobody was born especially smart or skillful. Emil, it all comes down to practicing and exercising. You just have to do it more than others."

On Saturdays, along with putting my shoes on, I also practice how to take out the garbage. I even started practicing going to the newsstand and buying newspapers, lollipops, matches... This is, also, called brain exercise. I am ten years old and now is the time to do this. Mom gives me money, explains to me how much these things cost and then I have to guess how much money the seller must return to me. Most of the time I get it wrong because there is no guessing in math. You have to be good at concluding things.

Today I managed to tie my shoelaces on the first attempt, and my hands did not cramp up.

“Bravo, Emil! See how trying can help you do everything!” says my mom happily while lifting her eyes from a piece of cloth she is cutting with scissors. She calls me over with her hand, moves my hair and gives me a kiss on the forehead.

I take the garbage bag and head for the doors. I will use the elevator to go down. I hear her reminding me to stop on the first floor where the professor is.

“Take his garbage also. Last Saturday you forgot to do it.”

The usual. This happens often. I start doing one thing and end up doing something else.

Like that Saturday when by his door, next to the garbage, there was also an empty shoebox. And I collect shoeboxes. Although my mom says it would be better to collect something else, something that other kids do. Who collects shoeboxes? She asks where else did I see this. It is odd to do this with old cardboard. What’s wrong with stamps and stickers?

Well, nothing. But stamps and stickers don’t have that smell of leather and rubber that remains trapped in boxes for a long time, or pictures of shoes on the outside of the box. That lets me know right away what kind of shoe is inside. I know where you can go and arrive with them. So on that day I took the professor’s box home right away and I put it in the bottom of the closet where the others

were. Later, when I went down again, who would remember his garbage.

As I walk to the elevator, the hallway is quiet. Too quiet. All I can hear are my shoes which I don’t like. Not because of the shoelaces, but...

My shoes are not bought at the store. They are not put on display like other shoes. And they don’t have a famous brand logo. I get them from old man Mario. So, no Nike, Adidas, it’s – old man Mario. Who would want their shoes to be called Old Man Mario? I mean, no one normal. And I am normal even though sometimes others say I am not. First he makes a print of my foot to help him make the shoes. I saw him do it for others, meaning I’m not the only one. There are more of us special footers. But this means nothing as I do not want to be special but just regular. I would want for my feet to be regular so that I could buy shoes from display windows. I have nothing against old man Mario, but he already knows that he absolutely must not touch my feet to get a better print. Instead of him my mom does that. Last time, in front of him, she told me I was childish and too big for such nonsense. For how long do I plan to keep that up? I don’t know, but I do know this has nothing to do with age. We tried hundreds of times and we cannot make this happen. It is not as easy as it is with shoelaces and garbage.

When the shoes are done, I walk in front of the mirror in his clinic. We are all looking at my

new, special shoes. They look great to them. What about me?

Mom is checking if the new pair, unlike the old one, is better and more comfortable. I say nothing about how they’re equally noisy and heavy and ugly and everything else like before. Until I break them in, they will squeak even more than the old ones. A common feature of all my shoes is that they draw attention. Most look at them and quickly turn their head away. Like, they didn’t see anything. Kids stare, sometimes they even turn. Like, they didn’t get a good enough look. I know this because I also turn to see who will stare longer. I’m good at that. I almost always win.

There is no wind howling through broken windows in our hallway today. Sometimes I think about it. About wind. How it dashes for the holes and not the glass. I wonder, do the window frame spikes hurt it? Why else would it howl like that? Windows in our hallway are always short on glass. They last for a while and then – blam! One can hear sounds of someone’s footsteps running away along with laughter. One thing is certain – I have nothing to do with that! Neither did I last year when Mr. Franjo from the 10th floor accused me of it. Mom kept telling him: “Why don’t you understand! I wish he did it! I wish! I would gladly pay to replace them and be the happiest woman alive!” Mr. Franjo said this is the last time that the building’s joint financial

pool will be used to replace windows. Next time, everyone can figure out whatever they want about this. Let it stay broken and let others see what kind of people live here. We will not be spending joint funds on kids with poor manners. Is that clear?!

It was all clear to me except; what does a broken window have to do mom’s happiness?

Squeak-squeak... there are no sounds other than my shoes while I’m exiting on the first floor and leaving my garbage in the elevator. I’ve always been doing this because it would be stupid to take my garbage when picking up more garbage. It is better if no one sees me. Professor Antun put the garbage in front of his doors and I took it as we agreed.

“I know best about disability in a household. You don’t have to repeat, dear professor. Of course it is not a problem, either I or Emil, we will pick up your garbage and take it down. Don’t worry.” My mom and he reached a deal and that was the beginning of it. Sometimes her, sometimes me.

I started going back to the elevator when the inner iron doors, like mouth of an animal, closed in front of me. It buzzed on upwards. Along with my garbage.

Well, I didn’t want to wait for it to return. It is a hassle to explain to others that I did not forget it and that I did not get off on the first floor by mistake. I’m not addle-brained and I did not mix up the floors. I know G stands

for ground floor. I am not crazy to admit that I am taking the professor's garbage. Someone else might get the same idea. Where does that leave me then? This exercise was getting on my nerves. I just did not tell anyone. Neither my mom nor the professor. It's how it is when you love someone; you shut up about things you do, which you don't like. There's only one flight of stairs down to the ground floor. I made a decision: besides practicing how to tie shoelaces and take the garbage out, I will work on walking down stairs.

With my hand on the rail I was carefully moving down. My shoes were making such noise like this is what they were made for: to be heard and seen. Once this noise caused a misunderstanding. Even today I think it was a misunderstanding and nothing else. A woman from our building, the one with an It Is Good to Do Good magazine subscription, said: "Emil, can you keep it down? I just went to bed! Why are you walking so much by my door? You're making noise." I looked at her and shook my head, because that, unfortunately, was impossible, unless I take my shoes off and walk barefoot. Mom lost it when I told her this. I tried saying that maybe I misheard, but then she got even madder:

"Emil, we both know that you cannot mishear something! You can misunderstand, but not mishear!"

That was it. End of story. Since then they pretend not to see or hear each other. Although we live close by. Door to door. Wall to wall.

Fortunately, walking downstairs did not take too long. I was soon on ground floor. I stopped by the mailboxes and put the garbage down. There has been an old chair under them for a while now, so I climbed on it. OK, mom says it is not nice to stick your nose into others' things because then you can expect others to do it to you too. And nobody likes busybodies. I couldn't resist it, and I was a bit bored. Our mailbox was empty and not interesting. So I peeked a bit in others. Some received fashion catalogues, some had letters and postcards. Mrs. Vjeka received the latest edition of It Is Good to Do Good. The professor had a mailbox full of unpaid bills. Supernova mall fliers were on the floor. I saw awesome sneakers on the cover page. This is what I want for my next birthday! I could wear them at least on Saturdays and Sundays since I have to take the special ones to school. I decided to tell my mom this when I get back up. So I put the flier in my pocket. I was just taking the professor's garbage when someone...strange and unusual burst in.

Lada Vukić

Lada Vukić was born in Zadar in 1962. She works as an accountant at the Financial Agency in Zadar. She graduated from "Juraj Baraković" High School and "Blagoje Bersa" Music High School. She won multiple awards for her short stories, Ulaznica in 2011, Pričigin in 2012 and PitchWise in 2012 among others. She was shortlisted for Večernjak Literary Prize in 2013. Her stories have been published in multiple magazines, web portals Kritična masa i Književnost uživo, and anthologies of the Samobor City Library, *Sušić Chronicles (Sušičke kronike)* and *Under the Roof of an Old Library (Pod krovom stare knjižnice)*. Occasionally she writes fairy tales for children, one of which has been dramatized and read on the Croatian Radio show "Bedtime stories" („Priče za laku noć"). Her first novel *Special Need (Specijalna potreba)* has been awarded the V.B.Z. Literary Prize and Tisak media Prize for the best novel of 2016. Žana Bumber, an actress, has converted the novel into a play.

World rights available for "Special Need"
Originally published by V.B.Z., 2016

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In the novel “The Book of Complaints”, Ivanišević deconstructs a myth about writers as enjoyers of comfortable lifestyle who are “creating in peace”, for a given period, in residential programs, isolated from the world and protected by a full board.

V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Jury Citation



When reading “The Book of Complaints”, the author goes almost unnoticed. He is masterfully hidden behind the plot, which despite its fancifulness and sometimes completely twisted turns of events, seems so damn possible. Not only funny, but hilarious, warm and moving at times, “The Book of Complaints” will definitely cheer you up and relax you. In the end, the only comment you will want to leave in it is – “excellent!”.

Andrija Škare, Gloria

Although “The Book of Complaints” is about writers, literature and the ambition to have our lives written, to give meaning greater than a neatly filed complaint to this short existence often ruled by chance, Ivanišević is in fact a universal writer, in the best possible way - a writer for any reader. His novels are nested Chinese boxes: you dive in as deep as you want, you can swim on the surface of laughter, or dive in and find out what lies hidden beneath.

Tanja Tolić, najboljeknjiga.hr

The idea behind “The Book of Complaints” was to try to write a novel in the form of four dairies written by people forced to live together for some time. I tried to do it and it was not that hard. In fact, I had a great time writing the novel. This novel offered me the possibility to become a woman, at least for a little while. In fact, I wrote from perspectives of two women. It is a priceless experience and I warmly recommend it to every man.

Ivica Ivanišević on The Book of Complaints



Writers are only humans too. Ivanišević successfully shows this in his novel where four very different characters, in the form of a diary, record their everyday lives.

Moderna vremena

After “The Book of Complaints” at least a hint of contemplation will remain – does life write novels or do novels write life? It will be remembered that writing is a matter of discipline and that only amateurs and adolescents wait for inspiration.

Jagna Pogačnik, HRT portal

All this offers quite nice, easy and neat content, ideal for reading on the beach. But (there is always an occasional “but”). For those who want more, this novel also offers more serious layers, which deal with destiny, role and importance of writers, writing and literature in post-transitional Europe.

Davor Šišović, Novi list

Here and there this novel really makes you laugh. At this time and place, that has somehow become extremely necessary, an almost forgotten, secret skill.

24Express

The Book of Complaints

Short synopsis

As everybody knows, a book of complaints can be found at every bar in Croatia and you can write your complaints and comments in it. But before that, you should definitely read it. You will enjoy this hilarious, sharp and intelligently written novel.

Ivanišević places his characters, four writers of different nationalities and poetic intentions, in a Romanian residence in the middle of nowhere, where they are to work on their books. They arrive to these isolated conditions with their personal and professional failures. The Croat just got dumped by his girlfriend and he is supposed to be this character who moonlights as a humorist and writer of westerns. The Finnish writer, who looks like a model, struggles with gothic novels. The older Russian writer works on another one of his lengthy realist novels about the horrors of communism in fear of a critic who terrorizes him and the Czech writer, besides drinking and mourning her late husband, struggles with poetry and questions of meaning. Here we arrive at a point where we need to mention that writers are only humans too. Ivanišević successfully shows this in his novel where four very different characters, in the form of a diary, record their everyday lives.

And their everyday lives are full of drama, love triangles, sex, cracked heads, lost daughters, alcohol and tricks, twists and turns worthy of the most gripping novels on the one hand, and the “quiet” notes on the writing process on the other. Ivanišević possesses a rare trait; the ability to present in a humorous way situations that do not seem funny. This gives each character an original voice and establishes hilarious dynamics worthy of comedy of error even where everything seems slow and boring (between writers, for example). In this brilliantly and logically narrated novel everything bursts from the realization that literature has a lot to do with life, even when writers resist that.

What can I do when I love writers since they are so small, making me feel sorry for them.

Dubravka Ugrešić: “Forcing the Stream of Consciousness”

Finea bună, tote bune.

(Romanian proverb)

April 5th 2016

Petar Grah

It's been a whole month since she left me. I didn't see it, I only listened, although then I knew nothing about the unconditional conclusiveness of her actions. Just like every other morning, the distinctive sound of the door handle reverberated from the room in which she slept over the past six months, silence was then filled with soft, lazy rustle of felt slippers on the laminate, followed by sounds of: urine babble in the toilet, water splashing in the sink, a shower waterfall in the bathtub, rubbing of nylon and cotton in places I haven't rubbed in a while, rattle of heels and, finally, the slamming of doors. A morning like any other. Except it was not.

It's been a whole month, and I keep hearing the same things. It doesn't matter that I am a thousand kilometers away, in the middle of Romanian nowhere, 8 kilometers from the nearest small town of which I never heard before. I just managed to convince myself that I am losing

my mind, when it finally dawned on me that I wasn't alone.

The room next to mine is occupied by a young colleague from Finland. She looks like a model from a funeral agency commercial: as pale as quicklime, uses dark coal as makeup, tends to her hair with a dull sickle and wears the same clothes as Morticia Addams. She writes, according to the brochure they sent me before this trip, gothic novels. Critics praise her skill to tell stories not only with letters but also with emoticons. Hm... Could this genre then be called atrociton? She peed, showered, I listen as she climbs into bed: mattress springs are squeaking, the quilt is rustling... On the top floor there is an elderly Russian, writer of thick realistic novels about the atrocities of life under communist tyranny, and a Czech poet, around my age, consumed by, per the organizers, the final questions of purpose as such.

At the welcome dinner hosted by the writers' house landlady, a plump woman with a unibrow, only the girl from Finland and I were present. The Russian excused himself, not really cordially, with reasons we did not manage to fathom. At least I didn't. The Czech woman used no excuse for not joining us. Although I suspect it. In fact, I can smell it more than suspect it.

We ate plenty, but talked not so much. Between bites you could hear just bare pleasantries, at two thirds rate. The Finnish colleague does not restrict her use of emoticons to writing

alone. It appears she uses them for everyday communication.

Again I hear the mattress springs, she must be trying to get more comfortable. I wonder what goths dream of. I am afraid my dreams will again be about Her.

Aimée Kuusisto

Arrived. I fear it will not make me happy. The Russian is 66 years old. OK, I knew this beforehand. But I knew not that he switched his own chassis number and tampered with the mileage. Man, he's like straight outta graveyard. Like a zombie Orthodox priest. Making things worse, he walks around with his nose in the air. The Croat? Seems OK, usable, but if someone is a humorist, it is wise to be cautious. He is lauded as a cunning linguist? Yea, by the critics. I wonder whether he is... hm... bilingual, if he can do something else with his tongue. I don't know what to make of it. The Czech woman looks like a Czech from jokes. I mean, she is not rosy-cheeked or fat, she is almost a babe, but she reeks... Never before have I met such a thirsty creature. And it's not like I haven't seen all kinds of things. It's gonna be a very long month...

Vasily Pankratov

I believe I did not make a mistake. The house is in a perfect location. If General Zhukov was to be

revived with all of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs personnel and material-technical means at his disposal, he would not manage to find us. Peace is guaranteed here. Or at least it seems so at first glance.

The neighbors? Ideal! If I were to be generous, I would call them mediocre. But, naturally I will not. I have no reason whatsoever to do so. The Finnish girl looks like she was brought to the house in a police van. Fie! She supposedly writes horror novels, which certainly must be true if she writes about her esthetic accomplishments. Fortunately, she keeps to herself. The Czech woman's biography did not make any promises – middle age caught up with her, and she dabbles in poetry – her demeanor offers even less. She drinks so much that I feel like I'm at home. Only Russian throats are tormented by such thirst. That is fine by me: the longer she is a stiff, the less of a nuisance she will be. The Croat is, at first sight, the only potential danger. A humorist. Geez... I sincerely hope he is one of those stutterers who chose to make readers laugh since they cannot do so with their close ones.

I skipped the joint dinner out of caution. I also did not wish to waste time when things started going so well at Šeremetjeva café, while I was waiting for the flight to Bucharest. I think I know how to finish the chapter about Vadim Vladimirovič Kurganov's and Nastasja Kuharčuk Skrjabina's encounter. Upon reaching the last line, readers will be crying a river. Unquestionably!

Zdena Zahradníková

moved in, puked right away. not because of the ambient, but just because. sank in shallow despair, slept through the welcome dinner, was in anguish over this tragic aftermath for a long time. tragic in a sense that I depleted my booze supplies along the way. during the wee hours, finally built up courage to seek out the pantry. found it, poured brownish alcohol from a crystal jug into a plastic mineral water bottle. came to life, then died again.

April 6th 2016

Petar Grah

Unbelievable. I did not dream about Her, but the neighbor, Mrs. Kuusisto. She was sitting on a dresser with her legs spread while holding back with her hands, as I was hunched and licking, slurping and eating her shaved pussy covered with a forest of piercings. Everything was great – for me, and especially for her because she was moaning and puffing as if her soul was leaving her body – until some of that bijouterie came unhitched and slid down my throat. The horror! I looked like a cartoon character whose eyes are popping out on springs while trying to shove the vagina jewelry downhill, into my esophagus. Fortu-

nately, the girl was unruffled. She put me in the car, stepped on it and dropped me off at the local health center, brakes squeaking and all. A lubber with three teeth and a bloodied white coat was waiting there. Someone like him could not even get a job at a decent butcher's, let alone the emergency room. I was laughing so loud that the noise woke me up... What a nightmare... May it never happen again...

If I was religious, I would have thought that the Almighty is punishing me for virtual infidelity, or adultery in my dreams. But again, from a purely technical point of view, how can I be adulterous when I am single again?

The day was calm. Calmer than I would prefer. The Russian will not leave his room, I guess he eats when there is no one in the dining room or he is on a diet. The Czech lady does not really have an appetite, she must be getting plenty of calories from booze. The Finnish girl is still mostly quiet. And what is her muff really like? – is what was chafing me while I was chomping on a pork chop. Is it like the one from my dream, freshly treated with a razor or is the usual off-season jungle with hair all the way up to the top of thighs? As if she was reading my mind, she gave me a look as sharp as machete.

There was no other option but to spend the day writing. Which is perfectly fine. I'm behind schedule anyway.

Aimée Kuusisto

My first impression tricked me. Things aren't that bad. They're even worse. It is as if the Russian is not even here, which is not really a loss, but... The Czech woman is here, although that is not to anyone's benefit. Especially not the landlady's whose alcohol supplies were growing thinner. And the Croat... he is beginning to frighten me a bit. During lunch, while he was gnawing on bones, he started ogling me so that I was instantly inspired to write a story about a cannibal who kills literature graduates, cuts them up, roasts them and then names them after great writers to scrupulously respect graduate theses of each of his victims.

Vasily Pankratov

I am writing in agony, without stopping, pads of my fingers are about to bleed from the amount of typing. But I am as happy as a child, because Taxi for Gulag will be the pinnacle of my career. This never happened to me before – or maybe it did, but rarely – to stop after writing

a portion of text and read it with innocent excitement as if those lines were concocted by someone else, a complete stranger to me who is blessed with ultimate talent.

I imagine Šapošnjik's face when he gets the book. That asshole wrote that my last novel made me an old-fashioned pain in the ass, preoccupied with long forgotten topics. He was so uncouth that the article was published under the subject Pankratov, Look at the Calendar! Well, Šapošnjik, you look at it, mark December 1st on it, because that is when Taxi is to be published! On that day, you tiny, envious scribe, will face the book of all books.

I am going back to writing.

Zdena Zahradníková

my head hurts. so what. like I give a damn. it is easier to be killing myself here in front of three indifferent witnesses than to do it in front of the entire prague. ok, not the entire. it's a figure of speech. cheers, I make a toast to myself, while gazing in the mirror. even though there's hardly any cheer in living.

Ivica Ivanišević

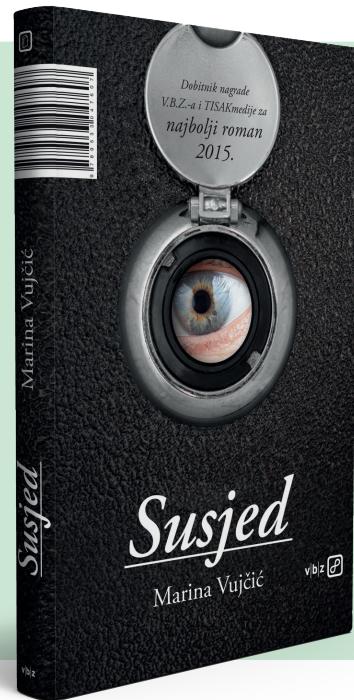
Ivica Ivanišević was born in Split in 1964. He obtained a degree in sociology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. He worked as a journalist and editor at Nedjeljna Dalmacija, Feral Tribune and Slobodna Dalmacija, where he now works as a columnist. He writes movie and TV scripts and plays. His monodrama *Life is a Miracle* (*Život je čudo*) premiered in November 2016 in the Rugantino Theatre in Zagreb. His novel *The Book of Complaints* has been awarded the V.B.Z. Literary Prize and Tisak media Prize for the best novel of 2016.

He has published the following books: *Smoje – biografija / Smoje – a biography* (Vuković & Runjić, 2004), *Caramba y Carambita / Sto mu jelenskih rogova!* (essays on comic books, V.B.Z., 2004); *The Umbrella Association and the Other Play / Krovna udruha i druga drama* (coauthored with Ante Tomić, Fraktura, 2005); *Split for Beginners – Alphabet of the City / Split za početnike – abeceda grada* (coauthored with Renato Baretić, Znanje, 2015), *The Entrance for Children and Soldiers / Ulaz za djecu i vojnike* (short stories, Hena com, 2015), *The Saddle is too Small for Two / U sedlu je tijesno za dvoje* (a novel, Hena com, 2015), *The Discharge Letter / Otpusno pismo* (an epistolary novel, coauthored with Marina Vujčić, Hena com 2016), *Primavera* (a novel, Hena com, 2016).

World rights available for "The Book of Complaints"
Originally published by V.B.Z., 2016

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Marina Vujčić managed to use an easy-going story from our neighborhood and fuse it with a colorful register of generic patterns whose elements she employs and betrays – from chicklit in the fashion of Bridget Jones’s Diary in which some New Year’s resolutions, typical of women, have to be made, to social and love novel, from an existentialist novel to a mystery novel with hints of horror, which make themselves visible at the moment when it seems everything has crossed the line of what’s normal and neighborly.

V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Jury Citation

In this novel that takes place mostly in the stairway and behind the half-drawn blinds of Katarina’s apartment, the reader is drawn into the dynamic and dramatic plot that is simultaneously gripping, tragic, but also incredibly funny. And the humor, ranging from self-referential to dark humor, is one of the more important aspects of the novel, which, pedantically but at the same time offering some other, almost filmic perspective, touches upon numerous topics of typical urban paranoia.

Jagna Pogačnik, *Jutarnji list*

This is a narrative that, at the more engaged levels of reading, offers a serious analysis of social and psychological side of modern urban life. The eye on the novel’s cover is at the same time curious and horrified, it peeps into the social reality, but it also gazes deep inside, it scratches the surface of universal unease we so often tend to repress.

Vanja Kulaš, *mvinfo.hr*

While writing the novel, I had no deep messages or morals on my mind. If I were pressed to come up with some, I could say that *The Neighbor* allows us to see that mistaken assumptions about other people can lead us astray, or that it can happen that we participate, very intensively, in someone else’s life without ever being aware of it, or that loneliness can metastasize into bizarre states and moods.

Marina Vujčić on *The Neighbor*



Be prepared for all kinds of things... Marina Vujčić is awfully good at scaring people, but you should also remember that Katarina Bauković is so good at manipulating with your feelings. Nothing is as it seems.

Tanja Tolić, *najboljeknjige.com*

The Neighbor is a novel whose scenes will make you laugh out loud because of the dark humor or the heroine’s actions, but at the same time, it will also make you stop and think because of the embarrassing feeling that Katarina is very reminiscent – of ourselves!

Denis Vukosav, *citajme.com*

The lightness of narration reached in *The Neighbor*, as well as the lightness with which the author recognizes life patterns and experiences and depicts them in the novel are not the consequence of this novel being an example of light fiction, as if may seem at first sight. They are the result of the author’s constant development in this métier.

Strahimir Primorac, *Vijenac*

The Neighbor*Short synopsis*

Just as ordinary middle-aged woman, living in an ordinary rented apartment in an ordinary building outside the city's center, with just an ordinary job at state administration and just ordinary hopes and aspirations falls in love with her neighbor who she meets in the building's stairway every morning. Besides the conventional "Good morning", they do not exchange any other words.

With this love story, which takes place only inside her mind, this ordinary woman will step out of her ordinariness and transform into a completely different person, and the plot of the novel will turn into a gripping psychological drama.

This is a novel about loneliness, invisibility and estrangement that take place not only in huge apartment blocks where no one actually knows anyone, but also within one's own family and among friends.

At the same time, this is also a novel about paranoia and madness. And how does a person go mad? In most cases – gradually. The writer's safe and humorous hand will take us from the irrational conclusion that the chance encounters of the narrator and her neighbor in the building's stairway are not an accident, to very serious delusions on her end. Many places in this novel will make us laugh out loud, while others will leave us with a lump of unease in our throats.

When the story is told by a mad person, it can be comical, or horrifying, but this also often implies one embarrassing conclusion: that mad person is sometimes dangerously similar to ourselves.

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7:15 a.m., that's our time. At 7:14, I lock the door and walk down the stairs from the fifth floor. Half a minute later, you lock the door to your apartment on the third floor. You catch up with me at the second or first floor, at 7:15. Sometimes you are the first to say: "Good morning." I prefer when this happens, but on occasion I beat you to it with my greeting so that you don't think I'm rude. Most often, you hold the door for me, and sometimes I'm first to reach the exit and so I turn around a little to make sure you've caught hold of the door and they won't slam you into the face. That really wouldn't be nice. But this is. You and I, alone in the stairway, in the morning. The footsteps we know. The encounter we've repeated for more than a hundred times in the last six months, which is how long it has passed since you moved here.

Most often you're very punctual, but on several occasions, when I hadn't heard your door locking or your footsteps, I had to slow down. Then I'd go back to the fourth floor and wait until I heard you, and then I'd make haste as if I too had been running a little late. I don't know if you've ever thought about how odd it is that we're always late on the same days.

When we walk out into the street, you head right, I turn left. The parking lot is on the left, the bus station is on the right. As I wait for the bus, I watch at the corner of my eye as you enter the car and leave. I

don't know where to, just as you don't know where I will go. When I catch a seat on the bus, I often close my eyes and imagine I'm sitting in the passenger seat of your car. I don't mind that you're quiet. All couples are most likely quiet during their morning ride to work.

Even though we always leave at the same time, we come back at different times. In fact, you're the one coming home at different times. It's impossible to guess your schedule. On occasion I spend more time at the window than I'd want to, but if I miss you coming home, for the rest of the afternoon and evening I feel as if something has been taken away from me.

Your apartment is exactly below mine so I can't look into your windows. If there weren't for this one apartment between us, I could lean over to see if your lights are on, but as it is now, it would be too dangerous.

It's the best when from my kitchen, that's looking out of the parking lot, I see your car turning into its spot. That's when I keep my eye on you – twice. For the first time from my kitchen window, when you cross the parking lot and disappear behind the corner of the building, and for the second time from my living room window, from where I see you entering the lobby. If I lived on the third floor, and you on the fifth, I would have another view – the one through the peephole. It wouldn't have crossed my

mind hadn't I, passing by your door, thought that you watch me through your peephole as I walk down or up the stairway.

As you cross the parking lot – sometimes with a sack, most often empty-handed – you walk slowly. It seems you're in no hurry to get to your empty apartment. That's how you walk up the stairs too. I know this because it always takes a lot of time before, my ear pressed close against the door, I hear you unlock the door to your apartment. I assume there's no one waiting for you – in this half a year I would've already learned if it weren't so. As far as I remember, it's been only six or seven times that I've seen you with someone, but this person couldn't be your wife or your girlfriend. The only woman who, according to my record, got into your apartment, was an older woman who, judging by her age, could only be your mother. As far as I could see from my window, she had something in common with your features, and you walked arm in arm, the way you would hold your mother who you don't see all that often.

Sometimes I think I should tell you how grateful I am. Because, you see, before – I hated my job. I hated the Agency. It was horrible to see all those people coming there, day after day, hoping they'd get a job, and then leaving disappointed because they didn't. Maybe they stopped hoping, I don't know. Maybe they keep coming just for the sake of it, because they have someone at

home waiting for them and they promised they'd go and check.

Thanks to you I began hoping. It's not that I want this for you, but today you can lose your job just like that, overnight. Before I paid no attention to the people approaching the counters, now it's different. Before I never thought that it might be important that I'm among the first who learn about available job positions, and now it seems that it's not bad, not bad at all, to sit at the source of information at times such as this when everyone, you included, could end up unemployed.

Even without that, at 7:15 a.m., getting up in the morning and going to work make sense because I know that I'll run into you, at least once in the day.

Kovač. That's what the plaque on your door says. I hope that's your last name. I don't believe you're renting, although that's not impossible either. When you moved in, you had your furniture delivered, but it's not that uncommon to rent an unfurnished apartment.

Unfortunately, the phonebook lists two persons under the name of Kovač at our address. It's a common name, and the building is big. Twelve apartments at each floor. Forty-eight apartments in total, two of which bear the name Kovač. Ozren and

Darko. I checked on the Internet when Tereza was taking her break. I'd love it if you were Ozren. Ozren and Katarina, that sounds best. Sure... Darko is not bad either, but Ozren is somehow more special. Once we get properly introduced to each other – and this could be tomorrow morning at 7:15 a.m. – and when you say, "Nice to meet you. I'm Ozren," I don't know how I will hide that I knew it! expression on my face. I'll manage somehow, I guess. Maybe I'll just make a comment that it is a nice name, as if I've never heard of it before.

Now is a good time to tell you that I have somewhat of a name fetish. Just so you know. I don't mean a fetish in the real sense of the word, it's more like – harmless. When a man has an ugly name, it's not a good sign. My ex, for example. Zvonko was his name. I could tell right from the start that something was wrong with him. You can't count on a man called Zvonko. Zvonimir – that's more likely, but Zvonko is just a nickname, something that makes a man seem not serious enough, even if he may be the most sober person in the world.

You'd probably like my name. I really like it. It sounds... a bit royal. Noble. It's a name that makes you interesting, at least a little, even if you're the most ordinary person in the world. At least that's what it seems to me. I wouldn't like it if you shortened it. When my colleagues at work address me

as Kata, I really go nuts. A million times I've told them not to call me that, but to no avail. As if Katarina bothers them. As if they're doing it on purpose. Especially Franjo. There you go – Franjo! The name says it all, it needs no explanation.

Today, for example, he took an extra half hour on his break. Just like that. He doesn't care one bit that Tereza and I have to take care of his clients at that time, that we have to explain to the people who come to his counter that all we do is register the unemployed and that we have no say in employing anyone. But he doesn't care about any of it. Neither about the people who can't find a job, nor about the two of us who feel uncomfortable when he's not there.

I'm not going to talk about Franjo. I get upset, and why? There are so many nice things to think about. See, today was a really good day. Just as I put on the soup, minding the window so that I don't miss you when you come home, I saw you car turning into the parking lot. This means I didn't have to keep guard by the window after lunch. When you opened your trunk, I thought that today you might be having guests. Three sacks, full to the brim at that. If you have a sack at all, most often it's just one, two tops. You rarely open your trunk. Of course, this doesn't have to mean anything. Maybe you just went

grocery shopping and bought more than you usually do. I often ask what you eat at home, you always bring so little. All right, maybe you get out later in the afternoon, or in the evening, but I don't catch you. There are more and more stores that are open late, and I also can't keep guard by the window all the time.

I have to admit I felt a little relieved when your guests didn't come. I don't know if you've noticed, but the sound isolation in the building is so bad that you hear every time someone rings the buzzer. Maybe not if you switch on the radio or turn the volume up on your TV, but if your apartment is quiet and your prick your ears, you hear it all through the ventilation shaft. From all the people who rang, no one came to your apartment. I went out to water the plants in front of my door, that's why I know. I was pleased that you filled up your refrigerator just for yourself, now I at least don't have to worry what you will eat for dinner in the next couple of days.

You have no idea how pleased I am that we have the same apartment. By its layout, of course. I don't know what kind of furniture you have, naturally, but I know how the

arrangement of rooms. When, for example, I'm sitting on my couch and watching TV, I always think that your couch is most likely at the same spot. There aren't many options in a living room such as this one. On one wall there is a large window, on another the door leading into the hallway, and the kitchen door is on the third wall. There's only one wall left for a couch, so most likely we're sitting at the same spot, maybe even at the same time. Sometimes jokingly I call it our vertical axis. We have a few of those, when you think of it. The bathtub, for example. Our bathtubs have to be at the same place. The toilet bowl and the washbasin too. All right, we won't talk about the toilet bowl, but if we're leaving our apartments at the same time in the morning, it's most likely that we brush our teeth at the same time so we're again in the same position. And our beds have to be in the same position too, because the bedroom is really tiny.

Now you'd think I'm exaggerating, for sure, but that's how we women are. Better get used to it. We turn everything into a romance. Even the most ordinary bathtub, let alone the bed.

Marina Vujčić

Marina Vujčić was born in 1966 in Trogir. In 1989, she graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb with a degree in Croatian language and literature and she has worked as the teacher of Croatian language and literature and language editor. She worked as the spokesperson for the Ulysses Theatre, founded in 2000 at the Brijuni Islands by Borislav Vujčić and Rade Šerbedžija. She currently works as the editor at Hena.com, and dedicates her free time to writing fiction and plays.

Works, selection:

An Escape up the Hill / Bijeg uz brijeg, a book for children, Hum Naklada, 1998

Treetop House / Kućica u krošnji, a screenplay, 2005

Someone Else's Life / Tudi život, a novel, Profil, 2010

Die a Woman / Umri ženski, a collection of plays, Hena.com, 2014

And Then Božo Started All Over Again / A onda je Božo krenuo ispočetka, a novel, Hena.com, 2014

It Could've Been Me / Mogla sam to biti ja, a novel, Hena.com, 2015

The Neighbor / Susjed, a novel, V.B.Z., 2015

The Discharge Letter / Otpusno pismo, coauthored with Ivica Ivanišević, Hena.com, 2016

Awards, selection:

Kućica u krošnji, the animated film based on Marina Vujčić's screenplay, won the Special Jury Award at Animafest 2006 and it won the Best Screenplay Award, in the animated film category, at International Film and Video Festival.

Umri ženski won the third prize at Marin Držić Playwrights Competition, 2014

A onda je Božo krenuo ispočetka was shortlisted as one of four Croatian titles nominated for European Union Prize for Literature, 2015

Susjed won the first prize at V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Competition for the Best Unpublished Novel in the Region, 2015



In the center of *The Hill* lies one of the most important problems of our age: the loss of identity. But the novel does not stop at that, new layers constantly open up before the reader. We can thus read *The Hill* as a story of a modern saint. Perhaps the man who protects other people from fire and goes around the island offering bread is in fact St. Francis of our age? This brilliant and complex novel will help us recognize him.

Zoran Ferić, member of the V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Jury Citation

Blessed is the solitude, blessed is the silence where things are created. There is so much noise produced because of the fear of everything that silence can bring. My character flees into solitude, he moves towards himself, because he is stern and enduring.

Ivica Prtenjača about his novel *The Hill*



On a mere hundred pages of condensed storytelling, “poetic detours”, meticulously crafted sentences, *The Hill* tells the story of the anti-hero of our time. His horror is unbearable primarily because of what he sees in himself – an individual who is becoming indifferent and afraid of change. However, Prtenjača’s character manages to feel that he is still in control of his life and can still find meaning in it. That is why we, the readers, faced with the same dilemmas, don’t really have to find some hill of our own, because now we have this, Prtenjača’s *Hill*.

Jagna Pogačnik, *Jutarnji list*

Ivica Prtenjača is first and foremost a poet – his expression, even in prose, has no redundancy, it is poetic, perfectly precise and rich... In some other country Prtenjača would also write short books, but he would be a star – one of those authors whose books are eagerly awaited and read early in the morning, late at night, on the train, bus or subway... Books that transform readers from savages during work hours to human beings thirsty for beauty.

Tanja Tolić, najboljeknjige.com

A beautiful and gentle, spiritual and witty text... Here stands a new Prtenjača, better than ever. His mythical *The Hill* is a short but magnificent and powerful novel... For reading and rereading. To be read and reread, with a pause to feel and think, and then read again.

Vanja Kulaš, mvinfo.hr

A novel that reminds us how simple and light, yet serious and strong literature can be.

Draženka Robotić, citajme.com

Prtenjača’s *The Hill* is a story about returning to nature in the manner of Rousseau, about the fight for survival of nature and humanity in a man, about the pursuit of lost freedom and identity.

Strahimir Primorac, *Vijenac*

The Hill*Short synopsis*

The main character and narrator of the novel *The Hill* decides to leave his way of living as a PR manager for the Museum of contemporary art and with it he leaves behind all the big events, speeches and art exhibitions so he can climb a hill on an Adriatic island and keep the island safe from fire. On the hill, while enjoying the company of a dog and an old donkey and the solitude of the isolated island, he finds his life anew.

The Hill is a deeply moving and complex insight into the main character – his inner thoughts and the context he lives in. The story unfolds gradually incorporating vivid characters, passers by: modern pilgrims, bikers, souls lost in the rhythm of contemporary life, hunters, veterans coping with PTSD, abusers...

There is nothing obtrusive in Prtenjača's narration, only the subtle, realistically and masterfully told story about a modern day man searching for the meaning of his life in a society that has lost its direction in the widest possible sense.

*World rights available**Originally published by V.B.Z., 2015**Other editions:*

- *The Hill, V.B.Z., Zagreb, 2016 – English translation*
- *Брдо, Makedonika Litera, Skopje, 2016 – Macedonian translation*

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A fly landed on a lock of Jesus' hair, then abruptly relocated to a poster of Hajduk F.C. and climbed up the thigh of a young soccer player gazing into the future. Then it flew up and smashed several times against the pane of a still closed window looking for an exit from this room in which I now stood waiting for a man whom I'd woken from his afternoon nap and who needed to write down my ID number, my first and last name, my cellphone number. That was the procedure, he explained as he rummaged through a cabinet whose tiny door irreconcilably tangled into a rosary and searched for the key to the blockhouse. He told me that one of his men would take me up there, but only in the evening, when the sun dropped a bit and people got free.

That was all, after his release I was already standing in the street, these were the first days of June, and the asphalt already melted and the heat pressed down on the back of the neck like a warning. I looked around for a shade and decided to stay right next to the Javorna Voluntary Fire Brigade's facilities, a place I'd just left thinking about the freedom that sets onto this place at one moment of the afternoon, here in this small place at the end of several worlds and at the end of several centuries packed into a single afternoon.

I didn't ask any questions, I barely managed to mutter my own name, what happens happens, I thought. The only thing I didn't know was what to do with this lethal silence, with the muteness to which my contempt and exhaustion with people had given such a painful birth. I could no longer deal with them, I felt like they were ripping the flesh off of my forearms, eating me alive me with their relentless babble and questions. They beset me, asked for something that didn't belong to them or that I couldn't give. Without exception, in those feeble bodies of theirs, they were magnificent artists, writers, renowned journalists, historic characters from the realm of politics and glossy pop scene charmers. They'd all discovered the secret of life, happiness and success. What did they need me for? In the end, why did they need all those exhibitions and books they barely managed to type and put on my desk, to make a career for them, to somehow get them on television, in front of a camera that's dying of boredom because of them. Who needed them but themselves, while they ordered special cakes and bouquets for me in return for their book promotions and exhibition openings? That civilized yet horrible arrogance they so abounded with had become intolerable.

Fishnets stretched out on the town's quay dried in the wind and, in an incredible scene, an old man and a young boy sewed their ends. Some sick electronic rhythm was pounding from the inside of a cake shop that had a huge refrigerator built into its wall. At its door stood a stern, swarthy man in a white shirt, and with the same intensity observed the passers-by and two younger men, also in white shirts, who wiped the tables and watered the flowers on the terrace. Here and there, a backpacking tourist or two sat on concrete rings around the palm trees: one in a bicycle helmet holding his iPad on his knees and typing. He was immersed in what he was doing and the screen ate half of his torso, his hands from elbows up and parts of his legs in robust sneakers were all that remained.

At a nearby store I bought two cans of beer, a half a loaf of bread, some mortadella, two tomatoes, and a small packet of salt: while I'm waiting, I'll eat my lunch. And I'll need salt up there anyhow, someone will probably tell me how to go about groceries, what to do about water, there has to be a solution.

From here, from the town's quay, the blockhouse couldn't be seen, did it even exist and on which side of the island was it, what would I be looking at for the next three months, all of that remained a secret,

at least for the time being, at least for the next couple of hours until one of the town's firemen, as I'd been said, got free.

On my knee, using the knife, which, at the time when I still went on summer vacations, I used to hunt octopuses, and which I'd decided to take on this uncertain trip, I cut the bread and then put the mortadella on the two halves, its biting smell almost splitting the palm tree under which I was sitting. I quartered the tomatoes on the waxed paper, salted them heartily and regretted it the very next second: what is waiting for me on the way to the blockhouse, is there any water, and will I get in trouble because of all this salt on my very first night up there?

Is the salt just the fear of solitude I am yearning for? The fear of nights in the wilderness, those forgotten rustlings and movements, night flutter and footsteps, the sounds of birth and death far away from people and their liberation in this tiny place by the sea, which, if everything turns out fine, this summer I will be guarding from fire.

Having one beer on an afternoon as hot as this one doesn't mean anything, quickly finishing another one means forgetting the silence I've been mastering and admiring for the past two years, it means having a conversation with a young man who's taking me up the narrow alley to

the very end of the town and showing me the monastery visited every summer by a couple of priests who offer some kind of renewal, he says.

Does he mean spiritual renewal? Yes, he does, foreigners go too, they don't know the language, they just stand there and pray, and then later there's a lot of work on the town's quay, in the coffee shops. He's a waiter, his father is a diabetic, he has an elder sister who hasn't married yet but has a boyfriend, they even have the same last name, but, you know, they aren't related.

Behind the monastery, behind the cemetery, behind the olive orchard, there was a Fire Brigade's garage, in it one polished old Man truck, a lot of equipment, fire extinguishers and water dossers, in front of the garage there was a huge pile, almost a mound of sand, and behind it, the wrecks of two Land Rovers, with no wheels, with no doors, their windshields smashed, but unusually clean. I noticed a brass plaque on one of them. The engraving said: JAVORNA – VELEBIT 1992 – 112th BATTALION.

"Is this a war booty?" I ask.

"Nah, my father drove that down here, he felt sorry, didn't want to leave the cars up there. I mean on Mt. Velebit. And how they got wrecked or what happened to them, I don't know, they say our guys

used them while up there, some say they did, some say they didn't, my father says they did, my uncle says they didn't. Who would know, bah, it was a long time ago, now they just stand here, tourists sometimes take pictures in them. And you see some parts are missing, the other night someone removed the axle and took it, maybe for his motor hoe, who knows."

Dino took a small green bag holding the two-ways out of one of the cabinets.

"Someone took the batteries again, must be the jerks that go after the pigs, stupid fucks, now we have to go back to the village, you can't go up there without the radio. Leave your stuff here, you'll spend the night and then in the morning we'll pack you up in peace. Let's go back."

"It's okay, I'd like to stay, you bring the batteries, tomorrow, if that's all there is to it."

"God, what will you do up there all alone?"

"Well, I'll be on my own for the next three months, what difference does a day make."

"Yeah, you're right, you're crazy. I can tell."

"Hey, Dino, what pigs?"

"Wild boars, what else. The island's full of them."

Behind the garage stood a room with a low ceiling and a couple of beds, a shower stall and a neat looking old-style transistor radio I had no intention of turning on, a pile of old newspapers I had no desire to touch, and a large glass bottle with a cork cap. In it, in the light of the late afternoon, glistened some honey-colored fluid with a couple of branches pushed all the way to the bottom. I opened it, it smelled of herbs and figs, I had no wish to taste it.

Shared sleeping rooms are sad, they are always in war, in preparation for an alert that will be sounded early in the morning, in a state of disquiet, nightmarish sleep or a feeling of not belonging. Hotel rooms are forbidding in their own way, mostly because of their absence of humanity, more precisely because of their imitation of hominess. I used to stare at the paintings hung up in hotel rooms, aquarelles or oils, and wondered who actually needed that shabby scenography, whom could it shelter from the emptiness that settles in once the hotel room door closes, emptiness that bites into your heart like sad news, whom could it fill with warmth. This sleeping room reminded me of both of my army barracks, the only hostel I ever spent the night in after on the main street of some town in the plains, speaking broken Eng-

lish, two prostitutes from one of Eastern democracies offered themselves to me.

Scared and sickened, I chased them away. They spat after me.

This long yet low room was tidy and clean, its concrete floor swept, its walls white, water stains biting through here or there, one light bulb in the middle of the ceiling, beds lined up one next to another, with no sheets, but with mattresses raised up, to air out and dry at the very beginning of the summer, in the summer night, to stand there like upright tombstones among which I'd fall asleep and wake up.

I didn't want to do or touch anything, I wanted to stay in my flaccid chrysalis untouched, unmoved. At the same time, I wanted to rip off the shirt of laziness and passive decay. I wanted to change, to start moving and that's why I lowered the mattress that stood upright on a bed by the window, turned on the radio, tuned to Croatian Radio Three, lay down on a low bed, and began leafing through old newspapers, some from two years before. With time, everything in newspapers dies, news stop being news, those who were getting married are now getting divorced, new car models are being sold at swap meets, economy topics find their way into crime sections, and all that is printed is not

worth one minute of someone's attention or someone's life. Except for obituaries.

They, in their astonishing form, in just a few words, in one image and a list of the grieving contain love and life and death. I read about a man with an MBA degree who passed away after a short and severe illness, about Buba, Bobo, Ogi, Grozda, and Stanislav who are saddened by his departure. But more than anything, I mourn those village people, very old, those who had their photos taken only once in their lives, for their IDs, in them they are standing all serious and, like American Indians, worried about that piece of their soul this photo shoot is about to take. In their folk costumes, under their kerchiefs, under their old-fashioned hats, those faces see me off into my own three-month-long eternity.

Because eternity, according to its fundamental characteristic, is in fact the unknown.

I've found a glass and now I drink grappa with those mysterious branches and wait for the morning, I wait for someone who could come and tell me that this what I'm doing makes sense, but I hear only bugs and mice travelling across that pile of sand, I hear it crumbling and sinking under their feet, I hear those night neighbors of mine devouring each other, and I hear a donkey bray somewhere, the mighty sound bouncing off the ground and scaling up the hill that I will ascend tomorrow and that I will, at least I hope so, descend naked, without that heavy and stale reticence that's on the outside restraining my limbs and on the inside locking my thoughts in.

Ivica Prtenjača

Ivica Prtenjača was born in Rijeka in 1969, where he graduated in Croatian language and literature. He writes poetry, prose and drama. His poetry has been translated into fifteen languages, among them into English, French, Swedish, Italian, Slovenian, Hungarian, German, Bulgarian and Macedonian. He participated in more than twenty European poetry festivals. Chair of the board for poetry events at the Goran's spring festival, editor, promoter and spokesperson for publishers, freelance writer and columnist, author and presenter of radio programs "My Choice", Prtenjača has been an active part of the Croatian cultural scene since 1998. He lives and works in Zagreb.

Works, selection:

Writing Liberates / Pisanje oslobađa, 1999
Yves, 2001

Nobody Speaks Croatian / Nitko ne govori hrvatski (with Branko Ćeđec and Miroslav Mićanović), 2002

Take Everything that Makes you Calm / Uzimaj sve što te smiruje, 2006

It is Good, it is Nice / Dobro je, lijepo je, 2006

Cruelty / Okrutnost, 2010

At Yves: 12 Stories and 84 Recipes from Prtenjača's Literary Cuisine / Kod Yvesa: 12 priča i 84 recepta iz Prtenjačine književne kuhinje, 2011

Awards, selection:

Prize for literature at the 25th Salon of Young Artists in Zagreb, 1998

Prize for the best book of poetry at the 5th Kvirin's Meetings, 2001

The Kiklop Award for the best book of poetry, 2006

The Dobriša Cesarić Award for best unpublished book of poetry, 2009

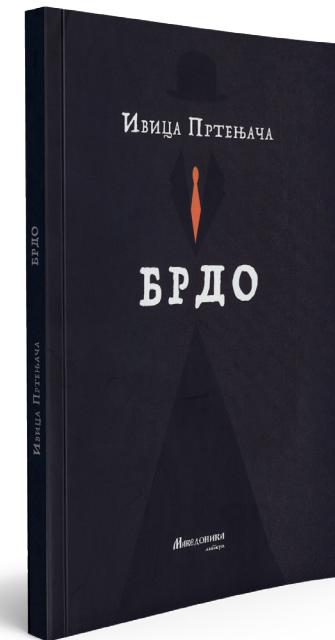
The Risto Ratković Award for poetry, Montenegro, 2010

The Hill won the first prize at V.B.Z. and Tisak Media Competition for the Best Unpublished Novel in the Region, 2014

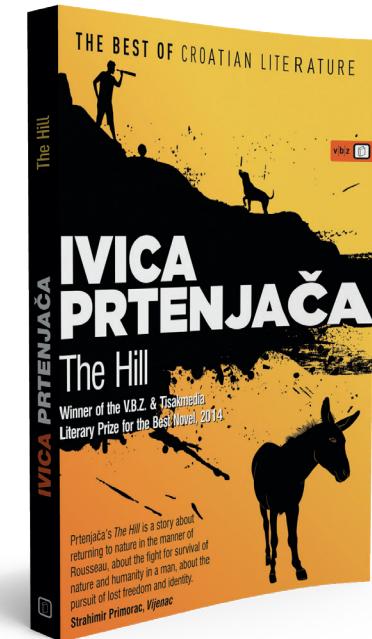
BOOKtiga Prize for the novel *The Hill* – the BOOKtiga Prize (founded with the goal of honoring books and reading, is awarded yearly to the author of the most widely read Croatian book in the libraries of the Istria region), 2016

The Hill has been shortlisted for the T-portal literary award.

The Hill has been shortlisted for the Meša Selimović Award for Best Novel of 2014 of the language region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia



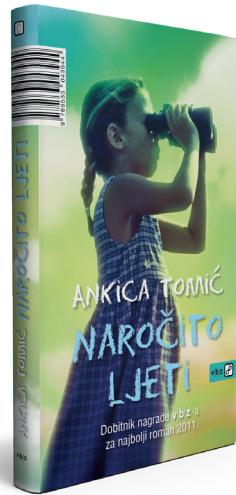
*Брдо, Makedonika Litera, Skopje, 2016
Macedonian translation*



*The Hill, V.B.Z., Zagreb, 2016
English translation*

Ankica Tomić

Especially in the Summer (Naročito ljeti)



Ah, love ... that is the greatest asset of Ankica's novel – not only does it hold together the scattered memories and connects them into a meaningful, intimate and boldly humorous story, but it is also the magic ingredient that emotionally connects readers with the Tomić family, as if they were their own family... *Especially in the Summer*, with its nostalgia, is as healing as a good homemade soup when we have a cold or as the gentle embrace of mother when we are scared. A must read!

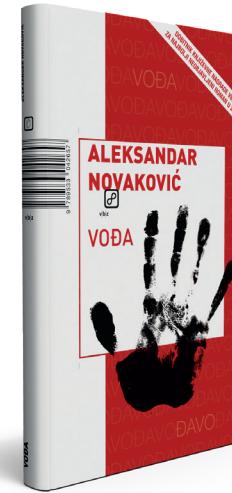
Tanja Tolić, najboljeknjige.com

Ankica Tomić was born in Makarska in 1972. She taught Croatian language and literature to elementary and high school students and worked as a proofreader for some of the most influential daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. Tomić writes book reviews, short stories and prose. She lives and works in Zagreb.



Aleksandar Novaković

The Leader (Vođa)



It seems to me that the profound horror of this novel doesn't come from the fact that it shows the world of violence and brutality, crime and criminals - we are already so exposed to that in our everyday lives and our level of tolerance is quite high – here the horror is, it seems to me, something else: a subtle support to patriarchal violence provided by its victims.

Dubravka Bogutovac,
Književna republika

Aleksandar Novaković was born in 1975 in Belgrade. He graduated as a historian and dramatist, and holds a PhD in theatrical studies from the University of Arts in Belgrade. A writer and a journalist, Novaković writes poetry, prose, drama, screenplays and aphorisms which have been published in many newspapers, magazines and art periodicals (*NIN, Danas, Književni list, URB, Koraci, Lipar, Reč, Polja, Letopis Matice srpske, Treći trg, Znak, Kvartal*).



Dragan Pavelić



It is a novel that will surely find its readers. Traditional, in a brand of storytelling that sometimes resembles Šenoa's he discusses the major topics of crime, punishment and redemption, and preserves different types of people, customs, houses and streets of a now almost forgotten time. It is a mosaic of diversity: corpse washers, manufacturers of soap, dream interpreters and matchmakers, all of which makes the novel fresh and exciting. For readers with an interest and sensibility for Bosnian topics that will be more than enough.

Marija Perica, Vijenac



Dragan Pavelić was born in Sarajevo, in 1946. A prominent psychiatrist, professor of psychology at Academy of Performing Arts in Sarajevo, Pavelić moved to Zagreb during the 90's where his literary career began.

The Karlín Spring (Proljeće u Karolinentalu)

Predrag Crnković



Crnković... definitely "read a lot", as evidenced by a series of literary and film references in the novel. His main character, however, truly 'drew the short straw' living in Belgrade and surviving the post-war period and transition, sanctions and bombing, general poverty and the creation of the "turbo-folk aristocracy", as an intelligent and educated young man who's never felt like he belongs... Crnkovic grappled with some of the major literary issues of our time. The relationship of reality and fiction, the potential of literature to document life, external (lived) or inner experience of the narrator, and the position of a postmodernist that is afraid of life, are only some of the raised questions that this novel tries to answer.

Jagna Pogačnik, Jutarnji list



Predrag Crnković, writer and translator, has published more than ten books of short stories, essays, reviews and poetry and translated 30 books from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Numerous works, both fiction and translation, have been published in literary magazines all over the Balkans.

Svjetlana Gjoni



Gjoni knows very well that the reader should be immersed at the beginning of the story so, as she says, she “throws a hook” in the form of a crime scenario – a basement in Vienna, two dead bodies and a missing girl. The unfolding novel is the translation of the scrolls found with the lady who found herself in the basement when police arrived and said “alles im Roman”. This “all in the novel” is an extremely digressive story, narrated by two voices, that depicts intertwined destinies of three women - grandmother, mother and daughter, chained to the fate of others, cites writers and philosophers, presents conclusions, asks questions, and much more.

Jagna Pogačnik, *Jutarnji list*

Svjetlana Gjoni was born in 1950, in Zagreb where she graduated in Russian language and literature and Philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Fond of languages, Gjoni learned Polish, English, German, Italian, Spanish and French. She is the first debutante to win the V.B.Z.'s Prize for Best Unpublished Novel.



Nemo Naught (Nula Nemo)

Hrvoje Šalković

Pretend You Did Not See This (Pravi se dao ovo nisi vidio)



Pretend You Did Not See This definitely represents something original and, ultimately, welcome, as the road novel, a genre that so heavily relies on pop culture references, has not been a common occurrence in Croatian literature. Šalković admitted to being influenced by the beat generation, which is abundantly clear as his novel forms a certain “blood-brotherhood in the universe” with Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Add that old dirty man Bukowski and a pinch of Bob Dylan to the mix as a sort of constant leitmotif, and the idea Šalković was going for becomes much clearer.

Jagna Pogačnik, *Jutarnji list*

Hrvoje Šalković was born in Zagreb in 1973. He obtained a degree in journalism at the Faculty of Political Science, and worked as a sports journalist for some time. After arriving in London to improve his knowledge of English, he stayed in England for three years and enrolled in a postgraduate program at Westminster University, where he graduated in the year 2000. During his London days, Šalković wrote his first stories, which he self published upon his return to Zagreb under the title *com.opanci.com.obojsi*. He has travelled through 116 countries on all seven continents and has published 174 travelogues. When he is not traveling, he lives and works in Zagreb.



Nura Bazdulj-Hubijar



We are talking about shocking and dramatic prose work, which can hardly be compared to the prose patterns of describing events from history. It tells us about one of the most traumatic experiences of contemporary history in this part of the world. In spite of the seriousness of the topic and a load of moral life-related questions which arise while reading this novel, it is read in one breath and it wins the readers' hearts.

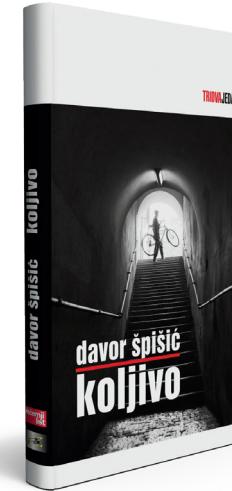
Mirela Mengeš, Hrvatski vojnik

Nura Bazdulj-Hubijar, born in 1951, is one of the most read and most prolific contemporary female authors from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Alongside her degree in medicine and employment as a doctor, her novels, stories and poems for children are included in school text books and obligatory school reading in the Bosnian language. Her works have been translated into the German, English, Dutch, Norwegian, Hungarian and Slovak language. She has received numerous awards for her literary achievements and her work. Along with the Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić and other acclaimed writers such as Meša Selimović, Zuko Džumhur and Miljenko Jergović, she is one of the best-selling authors in this region.



When It Was July (Kad je bio juli)

Davor Špišić



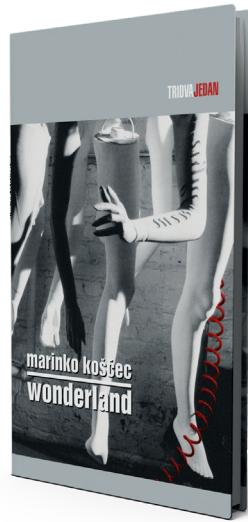
Using the conventions of horror as an external symbolic frame, the traditions of the family saga, and cuts in space and time put into composition, the author manages to faithfully portray a depressive and chaotic family that serves as a metaphor for the wider context of multinational and multicultural fates and traditions. The demons Špišić describes or hints at are not mere literary props, but universal symbols of evil created or awakened by people in every period and in every space. This is an exciting story that navigates its way between the tragic and the grotesque, told convincingly; this is a story that concerns us.

Strahimir Primorac, Večernji list

Davor Špišić was born in Osijek in 1961, where he still lives and works, as a professional writer, primarily a dramatist. His many dramas have been published in books *Foreplays*, *A Heaven Without Lights Off* and *Berlin, Charlie*. He also writes children's theatre plays.



Marinko Koščec



In the context of the Croatian prose production *Wonderland* is an extremely important book. Marinko Koščec is one of few Croatian writers who reads and writes literature which does not belong to the Croatian trendsetters' recommendations, and who can in no way fit into something like local trends or fashions of the moment.

Gordana Crnković, Zarez

Marinko Koščec was born in Zagreb in 1967. A professional writer and a professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, Koščec also translates the works of modern French writers, especially Michel Houellebecq, to whom literary critics have already compared his poetics. However, *Wonderland* by mere innuendo to Thomas Pynchon's famous novel shows that his referential frame is not that simple. Besides, Koščec owes to Michael Houellebecq approximately the same as he owes to Ranko Marinković or Slobodan Novak, one the greatest Croatian writers ever.



Wonderland (Wonderland)

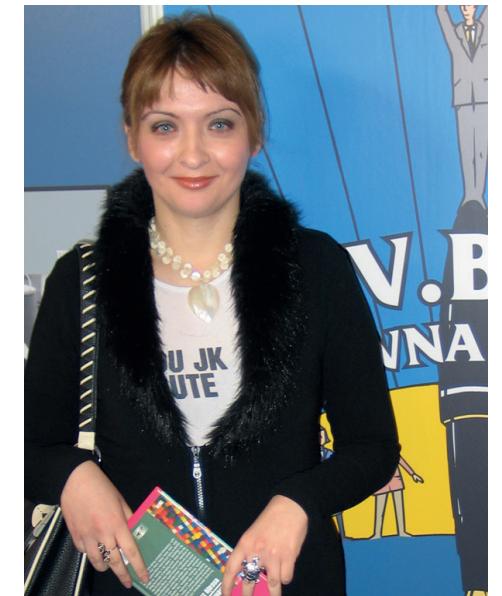
Jelena Marković



Cutlery for the Veal is an extremely scattered book, characterised by a decentred narrative structure whose leitmotif is nostalgic and ironic recapitulation of a sentimental education, with a lot of universally recognizable generational markers... It is a valuable publication of a new, cheerful voice that is completely different and unadjusted in the existing political, cultural and literary canons.

Teofil Pančić, Vreme

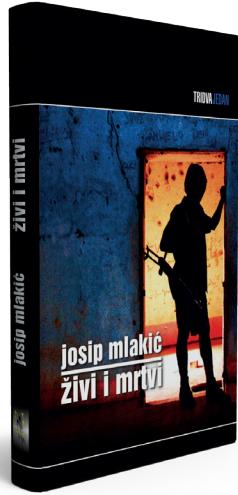
Jelena Marković (after 2005 Jelena Lukić) was born in 1975. She obtained a degree in philosophy in Belgrade, and today she lives and works in Sarajevo as a professional writer and journalist. In 2001 her drama *Criticism of the Pure Reason in the Balkan Manner* was performed at the Theater m.b.H. in Vienna.



Cutlery for the Veal (Escajg za teletinu)

Josip Mlakić

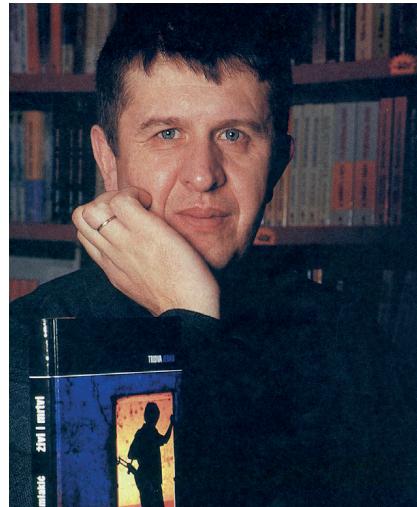
The Living and the Dead (*Živi i mrtvi*)



As a jury member I voted for the great war novel *The Living and the Dead* by Josip Mlakić to win V.B.Z.'s Prize for the Best Unpublished Novel of the Year, and the critical reception that followed proved *The Living and the Dead* to be an extraordinary novel that raises serious questions in an extremely interesting and surprising way. As such, this novel, I believe, certainly deserved that Prize.

Zoran Ferić, a jury member

Josip Mlakić was born in Bugojno in 1964, he received a degree in mechanical engineering in Sarajevo and currently lives in Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje (Bosnia and Herzegovina). In 2002 he won the V.B.Z. Literary Prize for the Best Unpublished Novel for his *The Living and the Dead*. The same novel was later awarded literary prizes Ksaver Šandor Gjalski and Petar Zrinski, too. A film, directed by Kristijan Milić, was made after the script of the novel, and was the absolute winner of the Pula Film Festival in 2007, alongside many other international film awards. Mlakić is an author of film scripts, too. A few short and feature films have been made after his novels.



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Uz potporu programa
Kreativna Europa
Europske unije





With the support of the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

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