

READERS FINALLY SAVOUR A NEW NOVEL BY DRAGO JANČAR

“...love conquers any distance, love conquers all. Except war.”

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Drago Jančar
Photo: Tamino Petelinšek/STA

Drago Jančar (born 1948), writer, playwright and essayist, is one of the most esteemed, widely read and translated Slovene writers. He has received notable Slovene and international awards for his works, among them the Herder Prize, the Premio Hemingway in Italy, and the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (Best Foreign Book Prize) in France for his novel *To noč sem jo videl* (I Saw Her That Night).

This spring we saw the publication of Jančar's eleventh novel, *And Love Itself*, long awaited among literary connoisseurs and other fans of his writing. Months after its publication it is still receiving strong acclaim from critics and readers alike.

The novel is already being translated into German (Paul Zsolnay/Hanser) and French (Phébus) and it instantly became a bestseller in Slovenian.

Your newest novel, *And Love Itself*, is set during the Second World War. History seems to have always excited you. You are interested in, as you have said, “what happens when fragile human destiny starts being ground in the millstones of history.” Is it simply a case of observing people, relationships, questioning human nature? Is this more pronounced in borderline situations?

Certainly, war changes everything, people become different, immensely scared and sometimes also extraordinarily brave. And all relationships are formed anew. Some draw strength from the massive engine of collective willpower, others from individual, often emotional reasons. I knew people who were in Gestapo prisons, who joined the partisans, who committed terrible acts after the war, things you could never attribute to them in normal times. It is not, however, merely a case of observation; the novel is a form which can become a living organism – the background of the true story becomes a platform for the imagination, inter-human plots, passion, love, malevolence and brave acts, life.

Although the title of the novel, *And Love Itself* points to this being a love story, the context attests that it is also and essentially a question of evil. The story happens at a time when hatred and violence prevail in the world. and when the destinies of the oppressors and the victims intertwine. It often comes down to the so-called banality of evil ... When and why does a person step over that blurred line?

A hard question, and in a way this is the very question the novel tries to answer. Many of those with good intentions and who act in accordance with their beliefs, cross it without knowing themselves when exactly this happens. In the circumstances created by the brutal occupation of the town, this line, which was also the line between life and death, was very thin.

At one moment big words, songs, music, the next moment killings. A spiral of evil. Somewhere deep down, however, attempts at love still kindle, despite there being little space for pity left.

When, in my childhood and youth, I listened to stories about the war, there was no pity in them, just real facts and strong emotions – crime and punishment, betrayal and revenge.

You have once more set your novel in Maribor, and have interestingly linked it with your 1984 novel *Northern Lights* in a passage that connects the past with a glance into the future. Namely, as the protagonist, Sonia Belak, waits in a bookshop



Jančar has received a number of literary awards, including the Prešeren Award, Slovenia's most prestigious arts award in 1993 for his narratives, plays and essays; the Kresnik Award for best novel of the year in 1999 for *Zvenenje v glavi* (Ringing in a Head), 2001 for *Katarina, pav in jezuit* (Catherine, Peacock and Jesuit) and 2011 for *To noč sem jo videl* (I Saw Her That Night); the European Short Story Award (Augsburg, 1994); the Herder Prize for Literature in 2003; the European Prize for Literature in 2011. Since 1995, he has been a member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

At the Kresnik award ceremony in 2011.
Photo: Nebojša Tejić/STA

for the young author of the novel *Northern Lights*, she comes across Byron's poem, a verse of which gives the new novel its title. At any rate, your omniscient narrator who can also see into the future is very interesting. Is this an innovation which allows you to freely pass through time and through the story? It is interesting what a strong effect these brief excursions of individual protagonists into the future have had on readers. When I wrote it, I was not aware of this.

After the protagonists survive terrible events, become entangled in evil acts or become victims of these, they still have to live on with all this.

And in some dark melancholy I saw how they live, how they would live. Bright flares of love covered in a veil of the past shine through cracks in dark memories.

The novel begins with a masterly opening move - we enter a photograph (the very one on the front cover) as if we are entering a film, and it suddenly comes to life. How is it with these openings - are they known at the earliest stages of the process, or do they come as you write?

When, by chance, I came across an old postcard of an almost idyllic Maribor street, I initially tried to figure out whether it was from the Austro-Hungarian period; two girls chatting and a few other people hurrying about their business. It was only after a while that I noticed a man in an SS uniform in the right corner. A dramatic tension surged from the idyll in the photograph; of course, this was wartime. I instantly knew that this was the trigger, the start of a novel. As I said, I had had the concept inside me for some time. At that moment, however, I found the key that opened it all up, allowing it to flow into a story of love, violence, killing - and survival. Life wins, even if *love itself* must have rest.

