

FERI LAINŠČEK | 16 novels

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FERI LAINŠČEK | 16 novels



# Feri Lainšček

writer

Feri Lainšček, born in 1959 in the Slovenian village of Dolenci and today living in Murska Sobota, is a prolific writer, playwright, and screenwriter, his opus including more than one hundred original titles. He is most well known for his novels, many of which have received awards and critical recognition. He is also extremely popular among readers, for many years belonging among the most widely read authors in Slovenia.

In 1995, Feri Lainšček received the Prešeren Fund Award for his novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla* [The Woman Carried in by the Fog]. In 1992, he received the Kresnik Award for the best Slovenian novel of the year for *Namesto koga roža cveti* [Instead of Whom does the Flower Bloom]. In 2007, he received his second Kresnik Award for the novel *Muriša*. In 2000, Lainšček's collection of fairytales *Misljice* [Little Thoughts] received an award for the best book of children's and young adult literature. He received the Kajuh Award for his novel *Raza* [Crack] and the Vladimir Slejko for *Astralni niz* [Astral Series]. In 2008, his work was shortlisted among the ten finalists for the Europe Book Prize and in 2010 he was nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

There have been six feature films made based on Feri's Lainšček's novels, one of which, *Petelinji zajtrk* [Rooster's Breakfast] was the most viewed film in Slovenia since independence.

# Ignacija J. Fridl

## The Sixteen Novels of Feri Lainšček<sup>1</sup>

6 |

Feri Lainšček belongs among the circle of writers, born in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, who dubbed themselves 'the generation without a metaphor' and whose work Slovenian critics refer to as 'writing after modernism'. This generation was bound not only by their age but also by literary landscapes in which the rational availability of the everyday world was shattered and the sovereign individual found himself standing at 'the edge of the abyss', searching for the answers in a play of words, stories, and worlds.

However, as early as 1982, the writer, Feri Lainšček, with his fiction debut *Peronarji* [Platform People], took a more independent stance, signalling that he would prefer to walk the Slovenian literary stage alone. His choice of a somewhat traditional path has proved, after a quarter of a century, to be the right one. Today, judging by the number of fiction works, translations, domestic and international awards, and film adaptations, Feri Lainšček is the absolute champion among Slovenian authors of not only his, but of older and younger, generations as well. His numerous novels are like stations along this path, though some stand higher than others on the vast transversal that defines the pilgrimage of Lainšček's literature. The peaks are certainly occupied by the most popular and awarded of his novels: *Raza* [Crack] (1986), *Namesto koga roža cveti* [Instead of Whom does the Flower Bloom] (1991), *Ki jo je megla prinesla* [The Woman Carried in by the Fog] (1993), *Ločil bom peno od valov* [I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves] (2003), *Muriša* (2006) in *Nedotakljivi* [Untouchables] (2007).

It is no coincidence that the works mentioned above are all situated in the furrowed world of the Pannonian plains, a place characterized by the melancholy of the human soul. This Slovenian region has also been coloured by the blows of history, by ethnic division, and by common striving for the meaning of life. In addition to the collective space, these works are united by the writer's discovery of the gap between dreams and reality in human life, between the sensitivity and longing of the female world and the logic, power, persistence, and rebellion of the male world. The specificity of Lainšček's literature is located precisely in this gap. It is here that the path through his novels finds its literary home, to paraphrase a sentence from Lainšček's Gypsy saga, *Untouchables*.

Having found this literary home, Feri Lainšček does not strive to reach higher, to reach other ideals, still less something as vaunted as the Truth. Lainšček, with a charming lightness that few other writers possess, crosses the borders of thousands of literary worlds. He describes their edges and gaps, their stories and faith, their love and evil, the truth of their quotidian lives and their mysticism, the melancholy and hope that never ends. With each word, he draws an eternal circle around man.

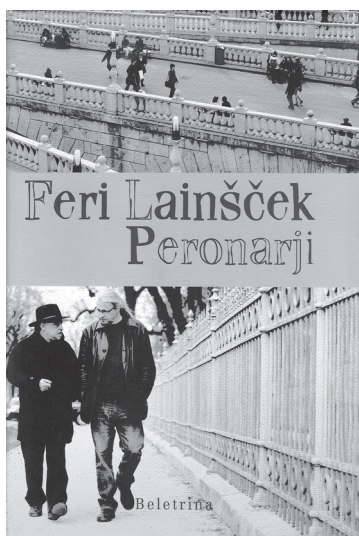
But Feri Lainšček's use of language reveals that he strives to do more than merely reveal man's fatal vulnerability, the gap in man's existence and his soul. His novelistic voice often evokes gentle and dreamy poetic images that hover above the literary events like fog, meandering along the riverbanks, carrying a message of mysterious beauty. This is the place where his words emphasize the role of woman. Critics have often pointed to Lainšček's female characters, sometimes even faulting him, questioning how the author could know them and describe them with such surprising intimacy. But the critics overlooked the fact that it is not woman as object of desire, but rather as a principle of being, endurance, and love that animates Lainšček's female characters. Lainšček, with the literary authenticity that lends his work added value and that is far removed from the inconsequential play of works, tends to embrace this principle himself. The will to life is therefore the red thread that unites Lainšček's extensive novelistic opus and also point to the meaning of man's seemingly meaningless existence. Love as will to life is the writer's response to the destructive will to power that dominates the modern world. With

this, the author steps from the margins of the Slovenian scene toward the centre of contemporary literary events. His personal experience at the margins gives Lainšček the strength to escape the self-satisfaction of the authorial self, and allows us, through his works, to witness the modern world, to see and observe the other and the otherness that exists in our proximity. His literature is like a dandelion flower that spreads its seeds of knowledge about what modern literature can do – with its charm and its didactic power, the modest search for the other, the overhearing of simple speech – and thus creates new meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Of Feri Lainšček's sixteen novels, two have been translated into English: *Namesto koga roža cveti* (*Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom* published by the Slovene Writer's Association in 2002 and translated by Tamara M. Soban), and *Muriša* (*Muriša* published by the Slovene Writer's Association in 2006 and translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak). Nevertheless, for ease of reading, all titles in this essay have been translated by the translator of the essay and will be referred to in English throughout. Likewise, all citations are translated by the translator of the essay and page number refer to the original text.







***Peronarji* | Platform People**

novel | 303 pages

first printing 1982 | reprint 2010

## Peronarji | Platform People

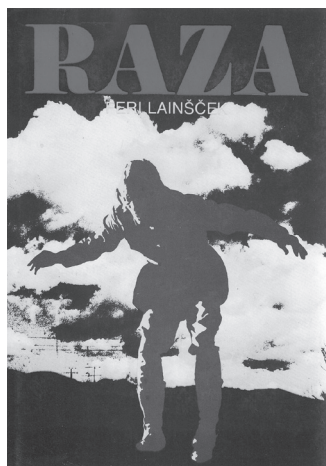
literature of the urban margins

*Platform People* is only about one hundred pages long and yet Feri Lainšček viewed it as a novel. The author deliberately chose as his subject unimportant people from the social margins, heroes of the dead-end “train platforms” of urban life. Some of these characters are making the transition from rural life, among them the unfulfilled painter Krc, who travels from alcoholic intoxication in train station cafes to tragic love stories, from failed artistic efforts to articulate a more beautiful world to total moral breakdown. Lainšček, who conceived of this work as an autobiographical statement in the first person, manages to create a contemplative commentary on vagrants and their life ‘philosophy’. But what was most important about this debut work was the fact, overlooked at the time of original publication, that *Platform People* modernized and urbanized the Slovenian image of Prekmurje, a region that is known for its traditional stories of ordinary people. This novel introduced a new genre on the Slovenian literary scene, the literature of the social margins, more specifically ‘platform’ stories which would later be developed by Franjo Frančič in many of his work, by Miha Mazzini in *Drobtinice* (1987), Metod Pevec in *Carmen* (1991), and Vinko Möderndorfer in the novel Maks from the collection *Krog male Smrti* (1993). Not least, Lainšček continued in this genre himself a quarter of a century later with his short novel *Ne povej, kaj si sanjala* [Don’t Tell Me What You Dreamed] (2009) when once again the literature of the urban margins found itself at the centre of this writer’s gaze.

The literature of the margins, as conceived by Feri Lainšček when he was only twenty-three years old, was thus not traditionalist. The margins – whether social, geographical, ethnic, or gender-based – actually became and remains

today one of the fundamental starting points of Lainšček's literary explorations of the world and mankind. People from the margins – Gypsies and drunks, anonymous veterans of history and failed loves, the homeless and the poor – represent the most important characters in his novelistic opus. The author has taken their destiny as his own, as he himself has moved physically from the urban centre of Slovenia to its margins, to Murska Sobota in Prekmurje, where he lives and works today.





**Raza | Crack**

novel | 177 pages  
 first printing 1986 | reprint 2006  
 Kajuh Award



**Razpočnica | Rift**

novel | 206 pages  
 first printing 1987

# Raza | Crack & Razpočnica | Rift

literature of the fragmented world and the broken truth

With the title of his second novel, Feri Lainšček directly announced that, from a closed and sealed environment, he would create a cracked, fragmented, and broken world. He exchanges the city for an indistinct provincial space between the Mura and Raba Rivers in Prekmurje. An unnamed third-person narrator replaces the first-person confession of the specifically defined main character in his first novel, and contemporary times gives way to history.

In *Crack*, Lainšček grows closer to the writers from his own generation who address a fragmented subject and world. *Crack* presents a world injured by 'the will to power'. It is the "*crack on the map – the crack through which you see man's loneliness at the bottom.*" (*Raza*, p. 35). At the same time, Lainšček speaks in this work of the depersonalisation of these fragmented landscapes, an individual who, after returning from the war, can no longer find his home. It is a metaphor for the loss of everything, including personal identity, which is apparent in the fact that the main character keeps changing his name (Jenö Forgas, Kalman Vrajoski...). But even with the change of identity, he cannot escape the inexorable external forces that push him into new situations, a new circle of violence, new authorities, and finally a new jail. As a result of deception and mistaken deeds, he is condemned again and again, until, as a volunteer with the name Evgen Maschantzker, he succumbs to an absurd death in a battle with the red revolutionary guard in Prekmurje. As Lainšček puts it in the middle of the novel: "*And he, as he had countless times before, slid into the echoless abyss of his fate: the landscape through which he stumbled, the things he touched, the people to whom he talked: everything lived an alien*

life and bent to laws that he did not understand. It was as if he once again found himself on an unmarked path, lost at a crossways that had never been recorded on any map." (p. 99).

At the same time, we find in *Crack* the tireless search to discern meaning in a seemingly meaningless existence, the notion that "*there must be a crack somewhere! – a crack though which you can see yourself redeemed*" (p. 16), "*a crack, on the other side of which you can hear a human whisper of holy mercy*" (p. 35). In the end, *Crack* is also a woman. It is no accident that the title of the book in Slovenian, both in sound and spelling, is similar to the name of the main female character – Rasa Maschantzker, married to the son of a Jewish family who disappeared without trace. Rasa is therefore a woman who, fleeing from violence and tragedy, seeks the intoxication of passion, moments of happiness, and strives to patch up her cracked world with thin patches of eager pleasure and desire. All that she accomplishes is done through undermining the principle of the male mentality.

Lainšček's *Crack* provides a lens through which the reader sees both poles of human experience – fear and hope, the suffocating blows of historical unrest and the stubborn persistence of the lonely soul, the destructive actions of man and the blind desiring of woman. In the end, both sides acquire equally tragic features on the wild merry-go-round of life. With this novel, Lainšček took one of the most important steps in his literary journey. He confronted not only the fleeting condition of modern man's soul, but he also – and this was important for his ongoing literary efforts – engaged with the flow of history, with historicized existential literature that, beyond spatial and temporal specificity and direct social criticism, reveals the larger social forces that determine human existence. These forces mercilessly drive the individual across the coordinates of life, making a mockery of the notion of free will, and unveiling horrifying metaphysical flashes. Franz Kafka was the pioneer of this modernist current and, although social criticism in Kafka's work was masked, both the castle, as the unsolvable labyrinth of alienating life, and the character K. from *The Trial* who embodies man in the merciful and merciless grasp of a manipulative totalitarian regime, are clear



social-historical metaphors. This trend has been even more acute in Slovenian literary works, fateful historical forces being treated in the works of Drago Jančar above all: in *Galjot* (1978) and *Severni sij* (1984), and perhaps less fatalistically in *Katarina, pav in jezuit* (2000) and *Drevo brez imena* (2008). In *Crack*, Lainšček enters this flow but doesn't retreat from his principal literary style and ideas. He maintains the same sense of detail and an acute sensitivity to the manifold expressiveness of language. With his second novel, he is even more sensitive to the sounds and connotations of words, and this tendency, especially as regards lyrical tones, will become even more pronounced in his later works of both prose and poetry.

In *Crack*, the author consciously strives to overcome the fragmented world by diverting the straightforward narrative that leads directly to death. Thus the novel proves the so-called postmodern weakening of the subject, though not the weakness of the object. *Crack* may therefore be read through Georg Lukács's "interpretative lens" as a typical novel of modernity. The novelistic world is dominated by the unbridgeable divide between reality and man's interior life, the ideas he cannot realize. Thus the protagonist is destined to a fruitless search, resignation, and finally collapse. Despite his passive role, man cannot retreat from his engagement with transcendence, which dominated him in the form of history, ideas, and the illusion of meaning. Evgen Maschantzker expresses this idea more directly: "*It was only travel, only journeying, a pilgrimage from crack to crack – the beautiful confusion of all that is unattainable... And yet I had to do it again, and again! Even after seventy-seven cuts, you still have to move, to scatter your innards, and live in never ending collapse.*" (p. 153).

In *Rift* (1987), Lainšček goes a step farther than *Crack* and reality finally explodes. Excerpts from the life of prostitutes during World War Two are randomly presented along with the scattered notes of the experiences of a contemporary painter. Having been first in the service of German officers, the prostitutes flee to Slovenian partisans. The most telling of the women's stories is Hana's.

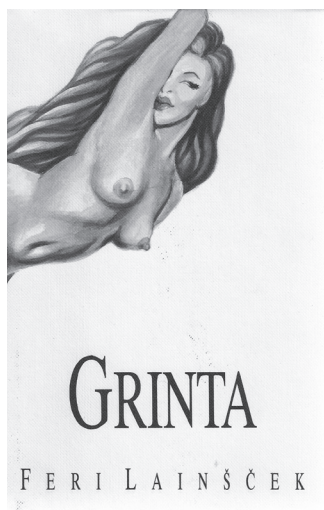
In *Rift*, Lainšček no longer precisely defines the location of events and the temporal jumps within the novel are illogical, as are the transitions from male to female perspectives, from fantasy to reality, and, on the graphic level, from

the main text to marginal texts. Thus the novel is similar to paper after a fire, or to a library from which the burnt fragments, after a conflagration, can no longer be composed into an integral narrative. Despite the temporal shifts, the author connects the two narrative lines at the end of the book so that it functions on the level of literary fiction, something acknowledged in the novel's final sentence: "*Yes: we the two of will make a new story!*" (*Rift*, p. 206).

Lainšček challenges the reader's efforts to rationally reconstruct the fragmented world of the novel. He does this by weaving a wreath of tremulous scenes and having two indeterminate voices alternating throughout the narrative. The reader cannot be certain of either the place of these utterances or of the reality of their existence. The reader can only surmise that they in some way represent the mute internal wanderings of the painter's seething imagination. None of the organizing rules of literary texts are respected, including chronological order and plot coherence. Because Lainšček essentially records the painter's internal thoughts, *Rift* is considered a Slovenian example of the stream-of-consciousness novel – inspired perhaps by William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that some Slovenian literary critics characterized both *Crack* and *Rift* as "two quite radically modernistic works" (Matej Bogataj; in *Delo*, 18.7.1991, in a review of Feri Lainšček's *Grinta*).

But what the reviewers failed to notice was that the flow of history in these two novels diverges. In *Crack*, Lainšček attributes the role of fateful transcendence to history. In *Rift*, the author presents some of the best-known episodes from Slovenia's national history, thus also triggering historical memory. The partisan resistance of World War Two in Slovenia – which, under the post-war communist authorities had become a protected model of thought, if not the central national myth – acquires the features of an ordinary story which is in no way different from stories of everyday life. Thus, in contrast to its treatment in *Crack*, history is no longer privileged. It is not negatively or positively defined, but rather is a neutral factor. This shift on the part of the author reveals a typical postmodern attitude toward transcendence – "*the authority of authority itself is annulled*" and "*transcendence has retreated*" (Tomo Virk, *Postmoderna in "mlada slovenska proza"*, 1991).

But I do not cite these examples with the desire to suggest that after *Rift*, Lainšček should be categorized as a postmodernist. I only emphasise it in order to draw attention to how dangerous it can be, especially in the case of an opus containing many genres, themes, and styles such as Lainšček's, to apply labels and -isms to specific literary works.



**Grinta I**

novel | 141 pages

first printing 1991

adaptation to radio play 1992

## Grinta |

the literature of the story within the story

After *Platform People* and *Rift*, *Grinta*, published in 1991, was the third of Lainšček's novels that featured a painter as one of the main characters. This fact is particularly interesting in the search for autobiographical sources in Lainšček's literature. The author once admitted in an interview with Marjeta Kajzer Novak that, as a student, he had wanted to enrol at the academy of visual arts. (Marjeta Novak Kajzer, *Tako pišejo*, 1993, p. 277). But rather than a portrait of the painter's collapse or his ongoing stream-of-consciousness, in *Grinta*, Lainšček presents relatively simple, even traditional, literary material. A vagrant girl, Silvana, responds to a newspaper advertisement that is nearly two years old to pose as a model for the painter Hubertus – his real name is Ivan Ivan. She comes with a companion named Grinta (the name means something like runt in Slovenian). Circumstances grow complicated when Grinta realizes that Ivan Ivan and Silvana, rather than some aesthetic visual work, are creating an eroticized image of life. Then a shot in the silence, a delicate stream of blood, and Grinta falls down, but his spirit will pursue the criminals until the bitter end.

The classic love triangle in *Grinta* and the spiritual suffering of the guilty parties recall the naturalism of Emil Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, but Lainšček also retrieves elements from his own opus. The figure of the painter can be found in *Crack* and Hana in *Rift*, at least insofar as the female figure is depicted as the fateful and lustful object of desire. But Lainšček is only playing with conventional literary material. The entire love-crime story is actually the raving of the schizophrenic painter

Ivan Ivan. Police detectives are unable to confirm the event and a panel of doctors conclude in psychoanalytic language that Silvana (Cila) and Grinta (Gojc) are images of the patient's living parents.

Lainšček's *Grinta* is therefore the Slovenian novelistic version of *Oedipus*, though even the authenticity of this story is challenged. Namely, if Lainšček, using a typical metaphysical twist, writes of the central story that "*the scene reflected in the mirror in truth did not exist*" (*Grinta*, p. 138), then the reader can conclude the same thing of the psychiatric story within the story. In *Grinta*, the novelist, in a refined manner, mocks rational attempts to determine what is truth and reality, and finally also literature itself as he merges traditional literary forms with metaphysical techniques. Among them, we can include the different levels of the story, the dual ending to the novel, the plurality of worlds and truths, the alternation of narrative perspectives, and the play on the clichés of psychoanalysis, which were also used in *Rift*. But it must be emphasized that in contrast to other representatives of Slovenian metaphysics, Lainšček does not become hermetic or scholarly in an effort for his literature achieve Borgesian vision of the world as a great labyrinthine library. Moreover, Lainšček does not attempt to construct his literature on the same 'spiritual basis' as the Latin American writers, the French post-structuralists, or the American metafictional writers and theorists of post-modernism. When he does draw from outside influences, he is more like to turn to his Slovenian predecessors than to his peers or international trends. It is probably for this reason that the novels *Rift* and *Grinta*, despite their modernist character, did not receive more critical attention and awards. Both lack the characteristic features of this particular author, the specificities of his reflection and emotions, the elements that excite us most about the works of Feri Lainšček today.





***Namesto koga roža cveti* |  
Instead of Whom does the Flower Bloom**

novel | 216 pages  
first printing 1991 | reprint 2002

Kresnik Award

adaptation to feature film entitled Halgato and  
television series in three parts Halgato 1994

English translation published in 2002



## ***Namesto koga roža cveti |***

### **Instead of whom does the Flower Bloom**

the literature of the Gypsy soul

The same year that *Grinta* was published, Lainšček wrote a book that successfully united the most important themes of his existing opus – characters from the social margins like those we encountered in *Platform People*, the mysterious region of Prekmurje between the Mura and Raba Rivers where the man's destiny flows along meanders and down dead-end tributaries as in *Crack*, and the excellent mastery of storytelling from *Grinta*. It is these ingredients that led to the emergence of *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*.

The story itself is classic: Halgato, marked by his Gypsy blood, succeeds in transcending his surroundings by coaxing melancholy songs from the strings of his white violin. His father, Mariška, had taught Halgato to play before his death. After the death of his father, the Gypsy community of Lacko roma cares for Halgato as his mother Tereza frequently disappears on mysterious errands. This situation continues until the tinker, Bumbaš, comes to town with his donkey, his whetstone, and a pile of children. Bumbaš sends his son Pišti to the city school and, from then on, Halgato begins to play in the nearby villages and earn money for Pišti's education. But Pišti ends up in jail when is accused of running over and killing two people with his friend Iza. Even before that, Bumbaš had run off because of the murder of a Gypsy who impregnated his daughter, and Halgato is left to solve the accumulating problems on his own. When Iza confesses to Halgato that she was driving the car and not Pišti, Halgato rapes the girl on the road back to town. Under the weight of his guilt, Halgato disappears into the swamplands. Twenty years later, Pišti, who has become a rich man in the meantime, comes and listens to him play the old melodies.

By now, this narrative is well known to Slovenians, above all because of the song by the Slovenian singer-songwriter Vlado Kreslin, after which Lainšček named his novel, and later because of the film *Halgato* (1995), with which Lainšček began his illustrious film career. Not least, it is also known because of the novel itself, which received critical affirmation with the Kresnik Award for the best Slovenian novel of 1992. That year Lainšček's Gypsy saga occupied second place on Večer newspaper's list of the most read books in Slovenia. It was positioned only after the exceptionally timely historical book *Premiki* by Janez Janša, in which the famous politician described the recent independence of Slovenia.

Doubtless there are many reasons for the extraordinary success of the novel *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*. One is certainly the fact that the writer gathered in it all of the best elements of his novelistic 'apprenticeship'. Lainšček's saga about the life and habits of Gypsies in Slovenia followed the revival of the Roma 'melos' in the Balkans that had been spurred in the 1980s by Emil Kustirica's films and the music of Goran Bregović. The presentation of the lyric poignant side of the Gypsy soul was a break with the Slovenian literary past in which the figure of the Gypsy was generally schematic, the personification of slyness and malice. Lainšček successfully avoided the moralizing that some critics had charged him with in his literary debut. The author is now only the faithful narrator of the stories told to him by life. And life tells us that reconciliation between the Gypsies – an island in the midst of the great ocean of society buffeted by the waves of history and all their destructive force – and the general population is impossible. Efforts to resolve conflict in the novel – both Halgato's retreat from society, into the fortress of the self, and Pišti's efforts to adapt his identity to the rules of the dominant social community – tragically fail. Lainšček would once again pose questions about this kind of reconciliation a decade and a half later in his novel *Nedotakljivi* [Untouchables] (2007).





***Ki jo je meгла prinesla* |**  
**The Woman Carried in by the Fog**

novel | 163 pages  
first printing 1993

Prešeren Fund Award

adaptation to feature film entitled Mokuš (2000)

## ***Ki jo je megla prinesla* | The Woman Carried in by the Fog**

the literature of faith and evil

Only two years after the success of *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, Feri Lainšček reached a new peak in his literary transversal. In the novel *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*, he deepened the literary exploration of Prekmurje – a region characterized by the meanders and dead-end tributaries that have done the most to define Lainšček – which he had begun in *Crack* and *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*. In all three novels, Lainšček draws more or less realistic portraits of the Pannonian landscape, which has been both the mint of tragic individual fates through the storm of history, and of the irrational desire that hovers above the plains of the Pannonian soul. It is no coincidence, therefore, that, after receiving the Kajuh Award for *Crack* and the Kresnik Award for *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, in 1995, Lainšček won the highest honour in Slovenian artistic achievement for *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* – the Prešeren Fund Award.

What the fog carried in was a woman, a figure from the past, and a story within a story about the original sin of Talaber, the priest of Mokuš. The main events of the novel, however, involve the chaplain Jonah Urski. Because Jonah interprets Christian love as disposing of his possessions, the Church punitively sends Urski to Mokuš, a parish trapped in the swamps, where no priest has stepped since Talaber's sudden death, a decade and a half earlier. It is at the crossroads where chaplain Urski searches for the God-forsaken Mokuš that he begins his struggles for the firmness of faith and divine proximity. First, in an extraordinarily powerful literary scene, Urski is taught a lesson by an addled old man. This is followed by his difficulties with the parishioners as he sets about the renovation of the Mokuš church, complications with the boat-

man Ciri who desperately wants a woman, the rising waters, and the apocalyptic visions of the blind child Mali whom the chaplain ignores. Finally under the weight of a crime, he flees from the village and during his flight he encounters an unknown female figure, a sort of bird of passage who warns him from afar about events in the village. The final scene remains shrouded in the fog of the title. It is followed by a terse report: that Mokuš has disappeared in a flood, only the renovated church rising above what was once a village.

In Lainšček's story of fantastic evil and faith, we can no longer precisely determine the geographical markings of this most eastern region of Slovenian territory. Nevertheless, Lainšček, through his art, creates a typical Pannonian atmosphere – a dim labyrinth of impassable swamps, a few scattered hills, and unending plains. This is similar to how the author Vlado Žabot has described the other side of the Mura River. The village name in the novel, Mokuš, has the sound of place names in the Prekmurje dialect and yet also approximates the name for the slender channels of water that flow so slowly through the loamy land that they almost come to a standstill. Lainšček also chose Mokuš because it is the name of an old Slavic goddess, the protector of women who are linked to the water. Thus the author unites Christian archetypes with pagan mythology, not unlike what he did in *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom* with the mingling of Gypsy superstitions and the typical Christian fear and respect for God.

In *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*, the author reduces the biblical story of global cataclysm to one remote village. In this regard, Lainšček's work presents the biblical word in miniature, from original sin through universal deluge to the few who are redeemed. Instead of the biblical Text with a capital T, Lainšček's pen gives us simply a text. And yet the author preserves a respectful attitude toward God's word in *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*, a respect that is amplified by his imitation of biblical speech. Not only do some of the characters have names from the New and Old Testaments (Jonah, Barabas), but Lainšček also uses numerous biblical images. For example, when he describes the position of Jonah among the Mokuš natives, he uses the metaphor of building a house on the rock (*Ki jo je megla prinesla*, p. 56). This message contrasts with Jonah's own efforts to renovate the church on damp loamy clay where a sturdy foundation cannot be built. In the

novel, unlike the biblical story, the church survives the inundation. Similarly, Jonah, in his monologues, often expresses doubt in the strength of his own faith, even suggesting that it might be better to be silent. On the other hand, he is the biblical son of the father Peter – of the Rock – upon which Christ builds his Church (Matthew 16, 17-19).

In addition to the biblical references, Lainšček also includes folk Christian symbols (for example, horseshoes and horse droppings as a sign of the devil's work), elements from old Slavic Paganism and Greek mythology, literary archetypes, and reworked citations from Slovenian literature. In this way, he widens and deepens the fantastic quality of Jonah's quest. This is done in a more authentic manner than it was in *Grinta*. It is no longer mere word play but deeply personal, showing the author to be a knowledgeable researcher of the spiritual history of humanity.

The character of Mali, both blind and insane, is the extreme of two literary images: first Oedipus, who in European tradition personifies the difference between sight and insight (he knows only when he becomes blind), and second the image of the village idiot, the 'child of God' who, in his irrational perception of the world and uncontrollable emotions, stands outside the knowledge of the community. Because this character – known from the work of the Slovenian author Ciril Kosmač – has special sensitivity, he is the only one in the community with a deeper knowledge of God. Mali, because he is twice afflicted, is the only one in Mokuš, a village founded on the laws of reason, egotism, and power, who can actually do God's work. With the following lines, he reveals that he can also see the future: *"The evil spirit can be found in each and every crack," "You see but you do not believe. I do not see but I believe,"* and *"Rather than coming with God, you are actually looking for him"* (*Ki jo me gla prinesla*, p. 70-71).

These subtle twists and turns, in contrast with the more one-sided ecclesiastical interpretation of the bible, provide manifold meanings and layers and complexity that can only be offered in literature. Among other things, this record of the brothers of Mokuš is a chronicle of one of the countless Prekmurje villages that disappeared in the past centuries, a seismographic measure of the vacillation and pain of one spiritual shepherd, a metaphor of the chaotic microcosm located in the main character as a symbol of modern man. The novel

can be read in a meta-literary fashion: as a deliberately archaic novel about the inexorable dialectic between crime and the punishment of sin and forgiveness, a moralistic version of the crime genre, a fiction in which the author in the final flood scene, inspired by Eco's *In the Name of the Rose*, erases all traces of reality. It can also be read ideologically – either as the author's criticism or affirmation of the Christian faith. This is the interpretation developed in the original introduction to the novel written by Taras Kermauner who read *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* as proof of Lainšček's growing closeness to God and the Church. Kermauner concludes that, with this novel, we can speak of "the beginning of the renaissance of a new Slovenian religiosity." (Kermauner, *Kaj – koga – je prinesla megla*, in: *Ki jo je megla prinesla*, p. 164.)

It is certainly indisputable that Lainšček deals with religious themes and language in *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*. It is also true that *Platform People*, which came at the beginning of his bibliography, was committed to the twilight of idols and the death of God. In that novel, a colourful scene of a failed theft of church treasures by two chums is related with no moral questioning. Thus, we can say that characters from Lainšček's later novels, in their secret conversations with God and their own consciousness, are much closer to the divine than those in the earlier ones. Ivan Ivan, for example, recognizes God, though he has a challenging relationship with him: "We are playing a game with God. It could even be said that we are taunting him. We try to see how long he can take it without seeking vengeance." (*Grinta*, p. 68). In the novel *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, the relationship to the divine is even more sharply drawn. The Gypsies have God on their tongue in moments of misfortune and powerlessness. They call to him, beg him, curse him, and speculate about him. After her husband's terrible death, the mother Tereza comforts herself and her son: "God will have pity on us. He knows he didn't do not the right thing. He knows but he doesn't have time for us." Halgato answers her: "Perhaps God is guilty of nothing. It's just that the devil is in you and God doesn't dare come near!" (*Namesto koga roža cveti*, p. 28-29). At the same time, Halgato yearns for reconciliation with God: "...it would be good with God. We wouldn't be looking at each other like cat and dog. We wouldn't have to figure out how to outsmart each other." (p. 152). His solitary playing in the middle of the swamp is his form of reconciliation: "Because only



here can you play knowing that God is listening. God knows that my song is not a prayer. It doesn't ask for anything." (p. 10). In 2009, Lainšček's novelistic account of the proximity and distance from the divine is concluded with a rather traditional and moral understanding of transcendence, as articulated by the protagonist of the novel *Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed* when the vagrant Edi speaks to his consciousness as he plans to commit a crime: "What would God think?" (*Ne povej, kaj si sanjala*, p. 63).

What place does the novel *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* have in the evolution of Lainšček's relationship to God and to the examination of his own consciousness? Certain questions about God are front and centre in this work and yet, with the image of the divided and doubting priest Jonah Urski, the writer offers no clear answers to the questions: what is the Church, faith, God? Jonah Urski is not suspended between worldly doubts about the needs of the body and the demands of the soul, about his own social status and what it means to help a fellow man, which is characteristic of many novels from Slovenian literary history that have a priest as the main protagonist (for example, Pregl's *Plebanus Joannes* and *Bogovec Jernej*). These priestly novels are an integral part of Slovenian literary memory, a part of the past, in the context of which *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* about the fateful amorous confusion of the Mokuš priest Talaber must be read. Jonah, a hero of our times, is struck by a more uncontrollable, ambiguous, and foggy evil. In the swamp of his indecision, in the tide of his doubts, in his search for the lost messages of reason, the chaplain Urski has lost the compass of his divine faith, not unlike the volunteer soldier in *Crack*. Also the church in Mokuš, which miraculously rise above the menacing surface of the water, is empty. For an institution founded on the community of the faithful that is dedicated to the collective service of God, this represents a spiritual collapse. And yet the Bishop, as a high representative of the Church, acknowledges Jonah's efforts and concludes the book with the following sentence: "What has happened has happened. Yet here you are and you are trembling. Is that not the best we can do?" (p. 135). Faith is no longer Christian; the truth is no longer beyond. Even though God has gone into hiding and man no longer knows what is beyond, he must remain in the here and now. What also remains is the faith that is needed: "when the battle

with metaphysics is over." What continues is "the battle for the metaphysical," as Milan Dekleva puts it in one of his poems. Lainšček's *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* also suggests that with the death of God will begin the battle for metaphysical life itself. It must be taken in its beauty and fragility; to search for power in the search itself. It is necessary to become a "dandelion flower" that sends into the wind its god-searchers, scattered to all sides of the sky and giving birth to new flowers, to borrow Lainšček's favourite metaphor from his books for children and from his interview in *Literatura* magazine (1993, no. 29, p. 48). Life itself is an important bridge within Lainšček's opus, the bridge between richly fantastic elements in the novel *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*, and the fact that the writer immediately afterwards wrote *Vankoštanc*, his most classical and realistic novel in literary terms – that is if we put aside the realistic character of some of his lesser genre work (such as the novel about firemen *Černelč in Agasi* [*Černelč and Agasi*] from 1994, or the satire *Umor v Slovenskem dvorcu* [*Murder in a Slovenian Courtyard*] from 1998, inspired by a drama of the same name.





**Vankoštanc I**

novel | 210 pages  
first printing 1994

adaptation to feature film entitled  
Traktor, ljubezen in rock'n'roll (2006)

# Vankoštanc |

the literature of rural realism

37 |

In the narrative *Vankoštanc* (which is the Prekmurje expression for a wedding dance with a pillow), Lainšček once again returns to the well-known space of Prekmurje. Indeed he even goes so far to as to the give book the subtitle 'a novel from our land'. And yet in *Vankoštanc*, the movement of the individual along the coordinates of the system of life is no longer determined by social-historical forces (as in *Crack*), or by ethnic or national identity (*Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*), still less by the inexorable dialectic of doubt and sin, evil and redemption (*The Woman Carried in by the Fog*). In *Vankoštanc*, the main role is played by love.

First, there is the excessive love of a mother to her son because of which the farm boy Breza takes too long to pick a bride. This is followed by the love of the newlyweds, Breza's marital existence with the pleasure-loving Sylvia, and their daily rural life. Through it all, there is the romantic play of lies, deceit, secrets, promises, punishment, and slander. The expression 'play' is especially appropriate here since Lainšček's novel is extremely dramatic – like a theatre play with dramatic punch and plentiful dialog.

In *Vankoštanc*, Lainšček addresses with the well-known themes of rural conflicts between the young and old generations, young people who return to the farm to marry but have no idea how to work the land, and the older generation who is loathe to give up their stables and fields. In the way, Lainšček adds a residue of contemporary urban literature to the rich tradition of Slovenian 'rural images' (Janko Kersnik, Ivan Tavčar). The somewhat archaic patina from these previ-

ous works is also present in *Vankoštanc*, although Lainšček adds some new elements to the classic rural portrait. He writes the story from the perspective of the village servant boy Düplin, who with musician Halgato from *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom* and Mali from *The Woman Carried in by the Fog* completes Lainšček's trio of village orphans. All of these boys experience a more or less tragic end within the strict rules of the closed community, but all are also carriers of important sensations, emotions, premonitions, and imagination that the ordinary individual, caught up in the concerns of social reality, has entirely lost. For *Vankoštanc*, the author's pen was dipped in both the sweat of desperate fear and painful sin, and the dewdrops of youthful dreams and the suppressed love of the poor Düplin. Lainšček also develops a strong collective subject. The village community, a strict and cruel organization, is harsh in punishing any departures from the accepted code of behaviour. The novelist uses caricatures to draw attention to the chameleon-like transformation of ideological colours from clerical black to revolutionary red.

But, as in many of Lainšček's novels, it is the family that resides at the centre of *Vankoštanc*. In many of these novels, the family is depicted as a wounded and slowly dying cell in which one necessary part is always missing. In *Platform People*, Krc has learned life lessons from his grandmother; in *Crack*, Evgen Maschantzker doesn't even know his own roots; in *Grinta*, Ivan Ivan has a painful relationship with his parents; Halgato is fatherless; Mali from *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*, and later Edi from the novelized stories *Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed* (2009), were abandoned as infants and brought up by strangers. Some sort of family fracture or break, therefore, marks most of Lainšček's characters. The writer reveals this fact in his works, draws attention to it, but never clarifies, in the psychoanalytic sense, how fatefully it has affected individual lives. In *Vankoštanc*, the author's attitude is different: the attempt to live a family life is always – either in the relationship to parents or to partner – doomed to fail. There are many reasons for this, one among them is woman's perdition, as Lainšček has described it, in previous novels. In this case, it is seen from afar, as something 'carried in from the

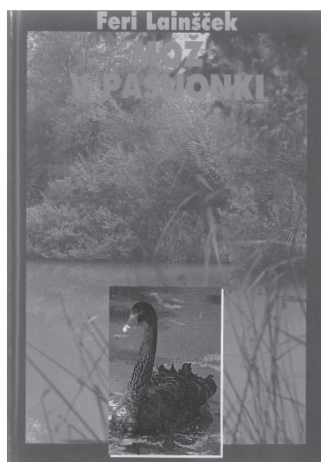
fog.' Nevertheless, it still has a fateful influence on the male characters. In *Vankoštanc*, Lainšček, in addition to the role of the *femme fatale*, uses two key elements that he has successfully marshalled on his literary path: a strong classical story interwoven with the lyrical speech of the Pannonian region, and stylistically emphasized language adapted from the simple rural provinces.



### **Astralni niz | Astral series**

novel | 155 pages  
first printing 1993

Vladimir Slejko Award



### **Mož v pasijonki | Man in a Passion Play**

novel | 334 pages  
first printing 1997



## ***Astralni niz* | Astral Series**

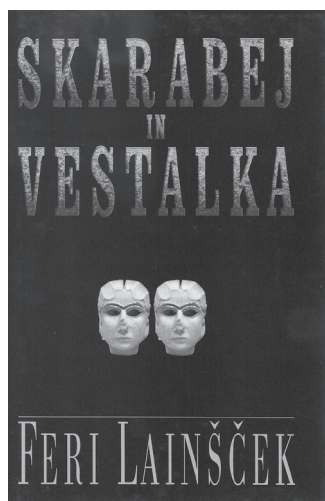
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## ***Mož v pasijonki* | Man in a Passion Play**

crime literature

During the period from 1993, when *Astral Series* was part of a newspaper contest (The Magnificent Five), until the end of the 1990s, Feri Lainšček wrote several genre novels. In addition to the already mentioned novelistic sketches *Černelč and Agasi* (1994) and *Murder in a Slovenian Manor House* (1998), *Astral Series* and the novel *Man in a Passion Play* also belong in this category. In these works, Lainšček introduces two relatively new features to his opus: first, the criminal or detective genre, and second para-psychological, astral, and (black) magical elements. These less rational insertions smooth and soften the hard outlines of the standard crime novel. In some ways, however, psychology and the fantastic are kin to the criminal novel in which the perpetrator is revealed to be a victim of family secrets. Thus the detective Jobst Borngraeber from *Astral Series* can no longer decode mysterious conversations with the dead using his own complex of rational conclusions. Instead of an epilogue, the researcher, Lina Damjana, and the head of the crime unit, Tonči Darginski, do not break the secret of the order of 23 sticks that is connected to a series of murders in *Man in a Passion Play*, but rather disappear forever. The truth about the murder is no longer the business of the researchers. To the contrary, in Lainšček's detective novels, the truth comes out in such a way that those who know it must lose their physical existence.

In this work, Lainšček attempted to put his own unique stamp on works of genre literature. And, yet, an interesting paradox emerged and persisted in this period. Though there has been much speculation about Lainšček's efforts to write more popular books by exploiting the criminal and detective genres, none of these books ever had the impact on the wider public as to his most important novels.



***Skarabej in vestalka* |**  
**The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin**

novel | 221 pages  
first printing 1997

## Skarabej in vestalka | The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin

literature of mystical fate

Perhaps Feri Lainšček's decision in the 1990s to shift toward more popular, and even populist, literary genres, provides one explanation for the fact that his novel, *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin*, did not receive more attention. In a Slovenian television interview in 2007, he admitted that, of all his novels, this one required "*the most comprehensive preparation and most complex authorial method*" and yet is his most "*overlooked novel*".

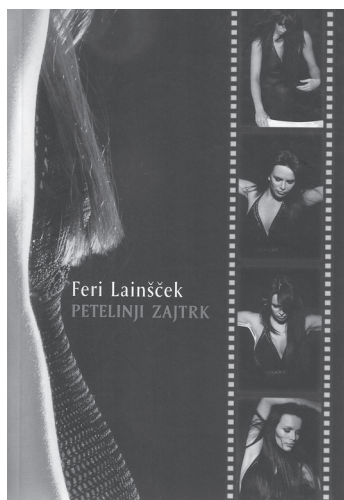
The narrative in *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin*, similar to *Grinta* and *Rift*, unfolds on three levels of reality, which correspond to three literary genres with which Lainšček had already worked in his novelistic career. The central character is Karla Marchlewska who carries with her the burden and fate shared by almost all of Lainšček's characters – namely, lost ethnic identity as her parents are Polish refugees in the United States, and her family is broken by the divorce of her mother and father. Thus she must embark on the painful, almost pathological, search for the meaning of her own life. This is the realistic narrative level of *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin*. In part because of her social, familial, and psychological characteristics – she has been going to a psychiatrist for years – Karla Marchlewska becomes the victim of a mysterious cult, the tyranny of which Lainšček had already shown in *Man in a Passion Play*. The so-called 'plunderers of souls' want to use to Klara to carry out medical-technological experiments aimed at controlling the human soul. At this point the realistic story about the fate of a woman lost geographically, socially, and spiritually shifts into crime genre, dealing with the criminal acts of scientific-ideological fanatics against anybody who tries to thwart their control. Doctor Guy Labriola ends up saving Karla from the claws of these medical psychoanalytical

technologues. She escapes to Europe with him, hides in monasteries, and experiences a sensual and emotional love story. But the scientific order finds her even in the land of her origins and, in order to finally end the ongoing cycle of crimes, she gives herself up to them.

In addition to the two levels of narrative discussed above, *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin* also has elements of the mystical-fantastic world. Namely, there is the inserted story of a girl named Njo written as if from the time of mythical prehistory, in the style of ancient myths and divine transfiguration of nature that breathes like a woman still driven by the impulse to give herself to a man. This episode, which is beyond any spatial and temporal reality, intervenes in Karla's story. Njo (which means "her" in Slovenian) is actually a subconscious mirror image of Karla herself, and the writer shows how the two are driven by one and the same force: love.

By mythologizing Karla's emotion, experience, and senses, Lainšček creates three narrative and stylistic levels that reflect the three temporal regions of man's existence – the undefined past which symbolizes Karla's subconscious, the present which is her current life trauma, and the future represented by the control of science and ideology over every human soul which symbolizes a sort of superego. Precisely because of this turn from historicized existential literature steeped in the past to futuristic writing showing human existence in the future, Lainšček's *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin* is the most fatalistic of all his novels. With Karla's submission to her fate, the writer reaches deep into his creativity to find the characteristic of human life and all that surrounds it. The fact that this novel was especially important to Lainšček is revealed not only in the above comment about it being overlooked, but also in the repetition of certain characters and citations in his later work *Trik z vrvjo* [Rope Trick] (2000). And yet, it must be said, that *The Scarab and the Vestal Virgin* may be excessively complex.





***Petelinji zajtrk* | Rooster's Breakfast**

novel | 218 pages

first printing 1999 | reprint 2006

nominated for the Kresnik Award

adaptation to radio series in five parts (2000)

adaptation to feature film *Petelinji zajtrk* (2006)

## Petelinji zajtrk | Rooster's Breakfast

blue-collar literature

As happened in the case of *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, the story of *Rooster's Breakfast* is well known to the Slovenian public because of an exceptional film adaptation made in 2007. In this work, Lainšček shows a group of friends from the margins of town who are more or less socially unsuccessful and who gather around an eccentric mechanic named Gajaš. The group includes the hotel singer Malačič, the melancholy philosophy professor Batistuta, a manager of a car fleet named Pavlica, a dentist with the coincidental name Tooth, and Lepec, the owner of a local nightclub. The life story of each of the men is characterized by powerlessness and the unfulfilled desire for change. They oscillate between course speech and actions on the one side, and romanticized, even eroticized, longing on the other. Most frequently, their days end with a long beer-soaked nights during which they muse about justice and politics, friendship and love. Love, that uncontrollable force, comes in the form of a young apprentice to the mechanic named DJ. He moves in near the group of men and dangerously complicates the lives of Tooth and Batistuta, and especially of Gajaš and Lepec. This is because DJ falls in love with Lepec's wife, Bronja.

DJ, a carefully calculated choice of the author's, narrates the novel in the first person. The narrative is built on two levels: everyday reality on the one hand, and the utopian realm of gentle emotions and passions, vulgarity and the lack of any personal and social responsibility in the first and human understanding and friendly compassion in the second. In the topsy-turvy atmosphere of Lainšček's *Rooster's Breakfast*, the burdens of past disappointments do not allow the male characters, weighted down by unfulfilled illusions and grand-

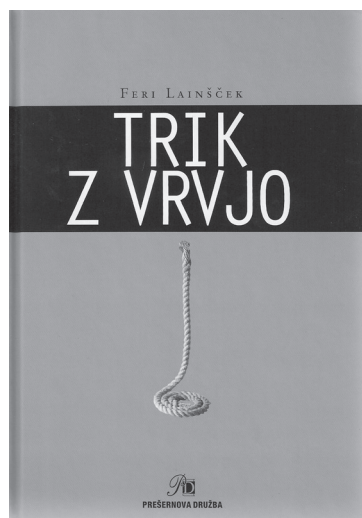
ose theories about how to seduce a woman's body and heart, to achieve their potential in love. In contrast to these characters, we have the somewhat naïve and amorously inexperienced young man who has not yet determined the parameters of his own life, and yet succeeds in capturing the affections of a married woman. Thus the apprentice surpasses his master, and the novel justifiably gives him the main word.

*Rooster's Breakfast* is above all a novel about love; it is a story about "love as an insatiable fish that first feeds itself on tiny crumbs and then becomes a giant and demands his own." The novel successfully depicts the growth of love from a tiny fish to a greedy beast; first fleeting observation, the secret looks, and the seemingly accidental meeting. Then comes the first rendezvous under a starry sky, the mad movement of the trees in the vaulted heights, and finally discovery and dangerous confrontation with the surrounding world, which can injure such a great love. These scenes are lyrical, sometime quite simple, permeated with the special mildness of the text, the sentimental dreaminess of the language with which Lainšček has treated his readers, especially in *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom* and *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*. And yet in *Rooster's Breakfast*, the writer describes the initial emergence of love and passion less than in the previous works. Rather, in a few strokes, he sketches the ambivalent relationship between young Bronja and her husband Lepec, as well her maternal feelings toward her child and her yearning female nature. It seems that there is much attractive literary material in *Rooster's Breakfast* that the writer spends less time on the detailed psychological foundations of the love story itself.

In his previous novels, Lainšček also proved himself to be a master of the literary depictions of ethnic groups, people from the margins, eccentrics from both urban and provincial settings. The village auto shop, where both lively male material and car metal is worked, is the ideal setting for Lainšček to refine and polish his craft. Lainšček shows off his now well-known skills with dialog that flows with a natural ease, describing a thousand and one drunken nights, a thousand and one casual conversations, the dissemination of wisdom, arguments and amusements enjoyed by the mechanic Gajaš and his company. The novelist cleverly and with a great deal of imagination interweaves the events and the relationships between people. He chronicles the quotidian and existential



lives of his characters that are somewhat uneducated yet enterprising men in middle age. Finally, the novelist, despite some vacillations at the end, skilfully unites both levels of the book – the apprentice's love story and the collective tragicomedy taking place in Gajaš's auto shop. From this perspective, Lainšček is one of the most skilled practitioners in creating novelistic structure in Slovenia today. But demanding readers may miss in *Rooster's Breakfast* the more profound ideas and substance from novels such as *Crack*, *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, and *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*. In this case, we must say that love is not one of the driving forces that push us up to one of the peaks of Lainšček's literary transversal. In *Rooster's Breakfast*, it seems that man can never completely master either love, or writing about love, and yet Lainšček's novels of the last decade belie this claim.



***Trik z vrvjo* | Rope trick**

novel | 191 pages  
first printing 2000

## ***Trik z vrvjo* | Rope Trick**

the literature of illusion

51 |

The turn of the millennium and its temporal magic also influenced Feri Lainšček. In his new novel *Rope Trick*, similar to *Grinta* and *Rift*, he again and for the last time pursues his literary-research passion, returning to his thoughts about the tension between being a man and being a writer.

In the touring show, the illusionist, Ljot Jastajev, performs magical tricks with his circus troupe. His assistant, Arči Belčev, warns him to stay away from Ruda, a female audience member with whom he performed one of his tricks. All the same, a relationship develops between them. In the third of the novel's six parts, Jastajev undertakes a mysterious pilgrimage to the old wise man Džev to learn a trick with a rope, but the old man does not disclose his secrets. Death begins to stalk Jastajev's troupe – first a cat is killed, then there is a shooting attack on a number of members. After this event, the police imprison Ljot Jastajev. The scene in the interrogation room and the betrayal of Jastajev by his guard, Gal Palko, who Jastajev in turn accuses of being a separatist, stand out in the novel. This is the moment of the realest reality – physical violence and death of illusion – and, at the same time, the death of the reality that Lainšček and many of his readers lived through themselves – communist Yugoslavia.

The *Rope Trick* is a cruel metaphor. Jastajev is not so much an illusionist as an ordinary man who lives in illusion and is not able to recognize the truth when he must. His own people betray him. The woman who Jastajev loves comes from the same clan that orchestrates an attack on Jastajev's troupe. Ultimately, however, Jastajev has been destroyed by

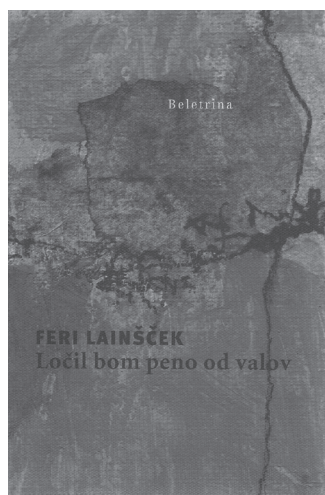
what he himself delivered to his audience – deception and betrayal. In *Rope Trick*, Lainšček develops the dialectic between illusion and truth as a trap in which every man is caught.

In the end, Jastajev is saved from prison and, because of this, the novel still leaves room for hope. Indeed the title of the penultimate chapter in the book contains the word hope, and yet hope is always bloody. The confrontation between the attacking clan and Jastajev's group is described by the Writer, and certainly emerges from Lainšček's own pain and shock over the horrors of the war in Bosnia at the end of the last century. "*The Gods, who play with people, have mastered a cruelty that the people can no longer escape... And the corpses whisper in the wind, and the children are mute with horror.*" (*Trik z vrvjo*, p. 159). In his pain, Lainšček openly writes his own judgement of humanity: "*The spiritual history of humanity actually provides the evidence... the letters that were overlooked, that didn't remain in anyone's memory. For time immemorial, the world has been run by men like Palko, for whom justice has no interest and truth still less. Innocent victims, who have been the majority in all such massacres, are merely the blood tax that must be paid.*" (p. 160).

Jastajev's search for the rope trick that he doesn't understand and that always gives birth to new evil, is similar to Jonah Urski's search for his lost faith in Mokuš. It is also similar to what causes Maschantzker to wander endlessly at the end of *Crack*. Jastajev also wants to find his love, his Ruda, to have a goal. But he cannot achieve this with his attitude. Džev reveals this to him. Ruda, the female principle of knowledge and behaviour, also knows and understands the mystery. The old man comes to the following conclusion about Jastajev: "*You're a funny man. You know everything and nothing. You don't believe in it but you want it anyway. You know you can't go there but you want to anyway. You know that I cannot help you and yet you demand that I do.*" (p. 171).

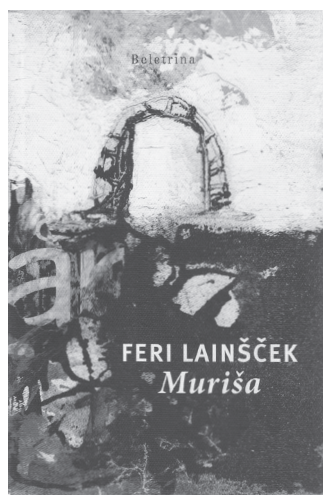
Lainšček continues to heighten the dialectic between illusion and truth. Jastajev once again meets the Writer, with whom he has become involved because of his relationship with Ruda. The end of the novel is the symbolic place where truth and illusion are united for an instant. The main character of the book finally recognizes this truth at his own hanging, and learns that the rope actually connects heaven and earth. It is not a trick or an illusion but the Truth itself, this border be-

tween life and death, between literary fiction and historical reality, between the role of the hero and the role of the Writer. At the turn of the millennium, in *Rope Trick*, Lainšček examines not only the fate of humanity but also the fate of stories, literature, and finally – with the Writer who frames the entire literary event – his own fate.



***Ločil bom peno od valov* |  
| Will Divide the Foam from  
the Waves**

novel | 318 pages  
first printing 2003 | reprint 2010  
nominated for Kresnik Award



**Muriša |**

novel | 225 pages  
first printing 2006

Kresnik Award

translated into English in 2006

nominated for the International IMPAC  
Dublin Literary Award 2010

# Ločil bom peno od valov | I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves & Muriša

the literature of love and melancholy

After *Vankoštanc*, *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves* represents the new expression of a love story in the style of *Katarina, pav in jezuit* (2000) by Drago Jančar, one of the few classical Slovenian love stories of our time. Lainšček's three-part story – it is divided into three novellas – follows the traditional plot of a love triangle between the chief surveyor Ivan Spransky, his wife Elica Sreš, and a war invalid named Andi Sziget whom Spransky takes on as a ward of the family. Spransky is a parvenu who enriches himself with dubious business arrangements and the exploitation of the gold resources of the Mura River. His wife is a healthy country girl with a modest background who is slowly becoming accustomed to the new world of her gentleman husband in the regional capital of Murska Sobota. Andi is a young man with a sick and crippled body but a robust heart. This collection of characters and their traits recalls the almost stereotypical features of Lainšček's literary portraits, but, because of his masterly style, the author transcends such limitations. The social origins and pasts of the characters retreat into the background, while in the foreground we perceive the rich palette of emotions and ideas with which Lainšček depicts the world of the main characters and the relationships between them. The master of this world is not reason, but dreams and unreality, full of premonitions and a rigid immobility. Thus Lainšček's literary dialect shifts from the strict realism, which characterized, for example, *Vankoštanc* and *Rooster's Breakfast*, to a magical quality more characteristic of Vlado Žabot's fiction and some of Lainšček's previous novels, specifically parts of *Instead of Whom the Flowers Bloom* and *The Woman Carried in by the Fog*. Like the mist that lightly hovers above the banks of the Mura River, so too the writer's

words, tuned a key or two above reality, float placidly across events, pulling the reader in like the current of a river, sometimes dreamy, sometimes dangerous and uncertain, inviting the reader into meanders and dead-end tributaries, into rapids and quiet pools, so that the book is drunk, so to speak, more than read. And what the reader discovers is the spirit of good old-fashioned literature, the recognition of a thousand mirror images, and the effort of one woman, Elica Sreš, to determine the coordinates of her own life and love.

From some perspectives, therefore, the novel *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves* is an expressly traditional literary work. Lainšček shows little desire or intention of following, in either content or form, the fatal divisions in modern man and his world. To the contrary, his authenticity returns us to the era of great literature in which the stories remain eternal, despite the transformation of the here and now. They have a universality that goes beyond history and asks the essential human questions. He returns us to these roots with the beauty that always emanates through his language, cleverly interwoven with the chain of events and the experience of the world, creating a fresco that is both intimate and grand. At the centre of the novel is the individual fate of Elica Sreš, a Slovenian version of Emma Bovary, a character who reveals the author's sophisticated awareness of both the longing and sensitivity of the female nature, and its rational and determined side, a nature suspended between womanhood and motherhood. Lainšček creates a picture with many remarkable motifs: for example, the romanticized war story about the pianist Simon Lenhardt, his otherworldly love of his wife Gita and his death, the portrait of Elica's mother who lost two sons, and finally the portrait of the bourgeois husband who steals her daughter's soul.

In addition to these characters, the horseman, Jenö Forgás, is noteworthy. He lives in a space and time beyond the novelistic here and now, which is due to the fact that he comes from somewhere else, from a much older novel – from Lainšček's *Crack*. Thus his thoughts extend into the past and the distance. "Only there," he says, "do you really realize how powerful God is and how vast is his perspective. Only then do you know that all heaven and earth is his eternal estate, yours is not even the fire that you just lit. Thus you soon cease opposing him and address him in this way: 'At least send me some wind from time to time,



a wind that has been travelling for a long while and has touched many things and seen many miracles'... And he really does send it, this wind from the plains, and you abandon your senses and at last you feel, at least for a few moments, like God." (Ločil bom peno od valov, p. 136). These words expand the borders of time and space in Lainšček's love story. They transcend fleeting human lives and the preoccupation with social conventions, revealing the spiritual shifts in the writer's opus.

Lainšček's novel *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves* could also have a more prosaic title – Border – the division between the left and right banks of the Mura River, between the mud of the poor rural areas and the hollow pink provincial bourgeoisie, between the turbulent waves of large historical shifts and the gentle lapping of the solitary soul, between loving and having. This is the fundamental dramatic principle upon which the writer constructs his novelistic words, characters, and stories. A border can have many meanings. It can be geographical – such as the border between Hungarians and Slovenians, and the one between the left and right banks of the Mura River. It can be temporal, a historical caesura that cuts through the lives of people. Or it can be a border of the self, captured in the walls of self-satisfaction, the imperative of 'always being right'. In terms of chosen metaphor, the novel, *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves*, certainly pays tribute to Lainšček's much earlier work, *Crack*. The border separates and divides, like a fissure, a cut, a crack that corrodes man beyond recognition, taking away his identity. And yet, in the later work, the writer softens his metaphorical allusion with the title. The process of division is still present, but the search for the border between the foam and the waves no longer takes place in the name of disintegration and dehumanization, but rather for love.

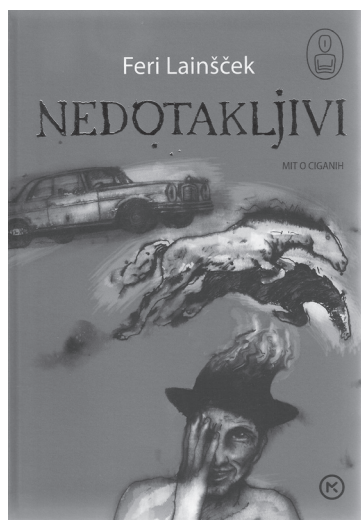
Looked at from this perspective, Lainšček, in *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves*, takes an optimistic step away from *Crack*. Borders exist; people are trapped by internal and external borders; borders limit us so we don't know where we can step; they hurt and squeeze us and yet they can be transgressed. "From then on, she carried a border inside of her that he was never able to cross," Lainšček writes in one of the key transitions in the novel (p. 193). He thus implicitly recognizes the place beyond in a woman's soul, a place that, though we cannot name it, we yearn to cross. And this is where Lainšček's words stop

at the end of the first part, on the other side, beyond. The shoes of Elica Sreš remain after her disappearance on the left bank of the Mura River, somewhere between Murska Sobota and the surroundings where the novel takes place. The beauty of everything to come carries an uncertainty with it, the powerlessness of language that unfolds beyond the border of silence. The vast breadth of this world, the so-called 'living idea of endlessness', excites Elica, especially when she admires the magnificence of her husband and his mysterious ways. The decision to leave him and her son is simply the decision to step across the border, to the other side of the finite world. Thus the end of the novel, which is comprised of a concise factual statement by her son Julian, is left open. Despite the metaphor of borders and the summoning of what lies on the other side of them, *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves* is a testament to the rarely expressed authorial awareness that the end cannot be defined, and it also, of course, calls for a sequel.

The sequel is the novel *Muriša* with which Lainšček confirms that contemporary Slovenian literature still carries the memory of a traditional, already nearly forgotten literary genre – the family saga. In this saga, we encounter the second generation of the Spranksy clan, Elica and Ivan's son, Julian. The backdrop of World War One in *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves* is now replaced with World War Two. The visible metaphor of the border in the first novel is exchanged for the symbol of the bridge in *Muriša*, a bridge that the engineer Julian has helped to build across the Mura River. The bridge exists in the long history of connecting the two banks of the river and, in the novel, is essentially Lainšček's love poem; it literally connects Julian to the girl Zinaida. But for Julian, Elica's son, the bridge also represents the means to tame and take revenge on the wild river into which both of his parents have ostensibly disappeared. In the battle with the river, which is also a battle with the past, Julian loses the future. When the girl's mother hints that Zinaida might be his half-sister, Julian flees from the truth and Zinaida tragically dies in a military attack trying to find Julian among the defenders of the bridge. The love poem thus ends as an elegy.

The hope that remained alive at the end of *I Will Divide the Foam from the Waves*, written from the woman's perspective, in a man's game disappears from the stage of life. After the war years, Julian Spransky, who has survived a fatal game with

a pistol, waits for his heavenly judge and “*wonders why I was not allowed to die along with the fifty million innocent and guilty souls whose lives ended during the Second World War.*” (*Muriša*, p 205). The end of the novel coincides with the end of the war. Thus the stories of the characters in Lainšček’s family saga follow the tectonic social shifts and cataclysms of the century. At the ending of *Muriša*, when Julian finds himself in jail, the writer already announces a new social quake on the Pannonian plains – the coming years under the post-war communist authorities, which will be addressed in the third part of the trilogy. Only in that book will the message of *Muriša* become clear.



***Nedotakljivi* | Untouchables]**

novel | 178 pages

first printing 2007 | reprint 2011

nominated for the Kresnik Award

nominated for the Europe Book Prize 2008

adaptation to radio series in five parts (2000)

adaptation to feature film entitled Šanghaj (2011)

## Nedotakljivi | Untouchables

the literature of the Gypsy soul revisited

Lainšček wrote his saga about the Spransky family gradually. During this period, he also took a mysterious voyage that brought him to his childhood home – in the vicinity of Gypsy life.

*Untouchables* begins with the myth that explains why Gypsies are condemned to the nomadic life. The book continues with a more extensive part called Reality, which speaks of a different fate, a Gypsy family that stays put in a Roma camp called Shangkai Gav. In the novel, Lainšček describes four branches of the Gypsy clan. The grandfather, Jorga Mirga, heads the first. He takes on a wife who already has four children, gets two more from her brother, has two of his own, and eventually can no longer support the big family. With the help of the village teacher, he writes a letter to Josip Broz Tito requesting help for a true communist such as himself. But the letter never finds its way to Marshall Tito. It is intercepted by low-level authorities who sentence Mirga to six years in jail and the teacher to twelve years. Upon his return, Mirga finds his wife in bed with a new husband and another child. But because he has learned a trade while in jail, he and the new husband, Suli Barjaktari, begin to make whetstones until the moment their common wife, Rajka, gives birth to a blond blue-eyed baby. When they discover that the father is a policeman, they come up with a crazy idea for revenge: they will impregnate the policeman's wife with a dark-skinned Gypsy baby.

In the second part of the novel, Mirga's grandson is the narrator. He describes his own father Ujaš Mirga who sired his first son when he was only fifteen years old. The son and narrator, a temperamental sort, despises the whetstone business and storms out of the settlement after an argument with

a relative. He begins to travel with his uncle's musical band, earning money, always putting some aside in his travel bag. After a couple of years, his father, Ujaš, also returns to the settlement driving a Mercedes Benz. He has grown even richer from smuggling and teaches this trade to his own son. At the end of the novel, Ujaš Mirga loses his mind and tragically dies while searching for the rock on which he will build his own chapel.

The main character of the last part of *Untouchables* is the narrator Lutvija Belmoldo from Shangkai Gav who has earned enough to build a true settlement for his Roma clan. On the day of Tito's death, his grandfather also died: "...truly the greatest Yugoslav communist. He remained faithful to his leader until the grave and now, on the other side, he persists on that path." (*Nedotakljivi*, p. 137). And then everything collapses. Lutvija tries to cheat an Albanian who has been gathering weapons for the war of independence in Kosovo. All of a sudden, a series of explosions rock the Roma village. The police discover the cache of weapons and sentence him to an eight-year prison sentence. Shangkai Gav begins to disintegrate and Lutvija's son becomes a drug addict.

*Untouchables* does not take place in an atmosphere of melancholy and resignation. It is a message about the incredible endurance of the Gypsy soul – and now Lutvija has a new goal, to save his son from drug addiction. And thus the never finished saga and the mysterious future flow toward the story of the fourth branch of the Belmoldo family.

Why am I describing the saga of the *Untouchables* in such detail? The reason is that the story, similar to the novel *Instead of Whom the Flowers Bloom*, is at the very centre. Like Gypsy life itself, the story is merely a series of events in the Gypsy pilgrimage through the world. Such a narrative strategy also accords with Gypsy ways, which are more than anything, an unquestioning acceptance of the cruel events in the biography of certain families, such as jail, suicide, and drugs. As if Gypsies, as indicated in the title, are not touched by any trouble or pain, as if they possess an eternal living acceptance of fate. Thus they were, are, and always will live as the Gypsy myth teaches us, from the forging of the nails for the crucifixion onward. They are condemned to eternally travel the same path, after each blow to begin once again their wandering life.

From this perspective, *Untouchables* is an authentic portrait of Gypsies uncorrupted by the wider world. Psychological analysis and social moralizing is foreign to them. Their madness has no deep psychoanalytical roots; their actions do not require the ideological, ethical or sociological legitimation with which the rest of the world is obsessed. They wittily admit their own flaws: "*Gypsies don't have the right skin on their hands for work.*" (*Nedotakljivi* p. 109). Belmolto emphasizes: "*There are many things on this earth that have a different value and price in our eyes than they do in the rest of the world.*" (*Nedotakljivi* p. 123).

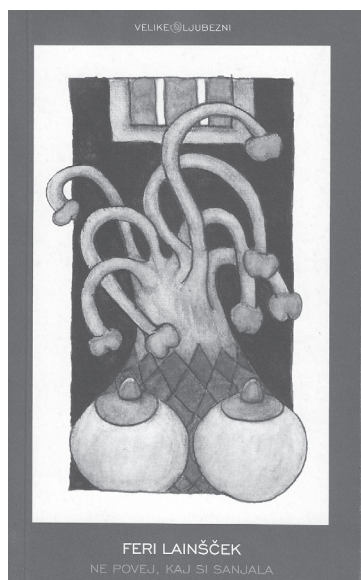
The writer, as he emphasized in both the opening and closing frame, is one of the few white people who comes into their midst, and thus one of the few *gadji* entrusted with their life secrets. Similar to *Rope Trick*, the Writer once again enters *Untouchables*, although, in contrast to the earlier novel where he dominates the events, in this one he is merely an eavesdropper onto the Gypsy narratives. A Gypsy friend of the writers refers to his situation as having knowledge without words. This authorial position borders on unnecessary literary narcissism.

In this context, however, it is much more interesting to discuss how Lainšček closes the circle of his fictional exploration of the Gypsy soul. In contrast to the novel *Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*, the events in *Untouchables* are not centred on a main character, but rather, despite the book's relative brevity, have all the features of a Gypsy family saga. The writer describes the events mostly chronologically, without excessive lyrical or fantastical insertions. Moreover, *Untouchables* is socially and ideologically clearly defined. Lainšček sets it in the period of communist Yugoslavia and populates it with familiar patterns of behaviour among authorities and ordinary people. Among these patterns is the prison reality, the blossoming of the smuggling trade, and incessant reference to communist party membership in an attempt to achieve one's goals. The social framework plays an important role in the events themselves as Lainšček imaginatively aligns the fate of the former Yugoslavia with that of the Gypsy clan. The story of each flows simultaneously, from a repressive form of governing to a blossoming, from madness to collapse.

Not least, in *Untouchables*, we find a refined humorous tone that extends all the way to the roots of the language itself. The writer permeates the narrative with Gypsy rhetoric. The simple declarative style in no way lowers the literary level, but rather – as in *Vankoštanc* and *Rooster's Breakfast* – highlights the authenticity and originality of the language. The humorous and ironic tone that prevails in *Untouchables*, taking precedence over the melancholy spirit of many of Lainšček's novels, promises that the upcoming film based on the Gypsy saga will achieve the same success as the adaption of *Rooster's Breakfast* (which was, as noted above, the most viewed Slovenian feature length film since independence).







***Ne povej, kaj si sanjala* | Don't Tell Me  
What You Dreamed**

novel | 129 pages  
first printing 2009

book on tape (2010)

adaptation to radio play (2011)

## ***Ne povej, kaj si sanjala* | Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed**

the literature of the urban margins revisited

Now at the end of his path through the “narrative forests”, Feri Lainšček returns to the beginning. He comes back to the narrative roots of *Platform People*. More than a quarter of a century later, with the short novel *Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed*, Lainšček once again steps onto the city streets where he eavesdrops on the words of the vagrant Edi Luhajev.

As a baby, Edi was abandoned in a shopping cart. For years he wandered from foster homes to the streets until, after he unsuccessfully tried to jump from a church bell, he found himself in the closed ward of a psychiatric hospital where he meets a woman who enchants him with her voice. Edi's first-person narrative describes it this way: “*It was very different from all other human voices that I have ever heard. It was similar to the sound of the night birds that I sometimes hear at the tram depot but have never seen.*” (*Ne povej, kaj si sanjala*, p. 46). The comparison of women and birds continues throughout the narrative. It recurs in the patient Galina who remembers her dreams of flying, and in the romantic love scene in which Lainšček uses word similar to those in previous works that played on the emotions of female readers in particular. Love is presented as “*the flight of two small bird above the abyss of madness.*” The image, used in such a context, already offers a premonition of the final slide of the main characters into the blackness of their emotions, the abyss of quotidian life. It becomes clear in the course of the story that Edi's friend, Daks, wants to use his retreat behind the walls of a psychiatric clinic as an alibi so Edi can kill an old invalid man on the order of his would-be heir. Galina herself had had a family life outside the psychiatric hospital. All of this becomes an obstacle to their love that cannot take flight, at least not for nine years,

which is the length of Edi's jail sentence for attacking Galina's husband. And after the passage of time, love does not return. When Edi is released, his lover no longer recognizes him.

And thus Feri Lainšček, in *Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed*, subtly shifts from the literature of the margins to that of love. But in Lainšček's literary works, we must not understand love in simple or prosaic terms as merely the erotic and emotional relationship between the sexes. Love, since the novel *Crack*, means the will to life, to be here, to listen, to persevere, tremble, and search for the proximity of the other. That is the kind of love Lainšček's characters teach us, the kind of the love that Galina gives to Edi. "*The rivers flow past, the trains run on the track, the marching feet of armies even, and I just stand there and look... I am not drawn by anything, nobody ever takes me along...*" (p. 58), complains Edi in *Don't Tell Me What You Dreamed*. But he changes after meeting Galina. She is the one who can draw him in, send him on his path so that he might tremble, so that he might persevere even after he has lost her. If I borrow Lainšček's favourite image of the woman as a bird – her soul is what teaches us to fly. Passionate emotions, deep melancholy, the sense of the inexplicable – these are the forces that have moved Lainšček's narratives from the beginning. This is why his literature is so seductively sensual. He reveals the melancholy search for the borders of human existence and never comes to a predictable or obvious ending.



## Ignacija J. Fridl

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Ignacija J. Fridl, born in 1968, is a well-known Slovenian literature and theatre critic, and scholar. She took a degree in comparative literature, philosophy, and ancient Greek. Her research often focuses on an antique understanding of art and its application to contemporary creativity. She has written the academic monograph *Jezik v filozofiji starih Grkov* [Language in the Philosophy of the Ancient Greeks] (2001). Her PhD thesis was entitled *Platonova teorija resnice z vidika lepega in umetnosti* [Plato's Theories of Truth from the perspective of Beauty and Art] (2006) and she has written several extensive scholarly articles on this subject.

Fridl has written over three hundred reviews, scholarly articles, and essays about Slovenian and international literature and theatre. She has edited several important Slovenian authors, sat on the jury of many literary and theatrical competitions, and is currently collaborating with the board of the Prešeren Awards, the highest Slovenian award for artistic endeavours. In 2000, she received the Stritar Award for the best young critic.

Fridl has been intensively following the work of Feri Lainšček for the last two decades. The accompanying essay is the culmination of her research of Lainšček's exciting and extremely popular body of novelistic work.

## Erica Johnson Debeljak

Erica Johnson is a writer and translator who has lived in Slovenia for almost twenty years. During this time, she has translated many works of Slovenian fiction and poetry, most notably Feri Lainšček's *Muriša*, Boris Pahor's *A Difficult Spring*, and Dane Zajc's *Barren Harvest*. She is also the author of several books of non-fiction and short stories, most recently her memoir *Forbidden Bread*. She lives in Ljubljana with her husband and three children.

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**Feri Lainšček**  
**16 novels**

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