

**Aleš Berger (ed.).** *The Key Witnesses: The Younger Slovene Prose at the Turn of the Millennium* (= *Litterae Slovenicae 102*). Ljubljana: Slovene Writers' Association, 2003. 180 pp., no price listed (cloth). ISBN: 961-91010-3-0.

The turn of the millennium in Slovenia was marked—albeit somewhat belatedly, in comparison to the United States—by a blossoming of short narrative prose, especially the short story. In British and American literature, this genre is generally not sharply delineated from other genres (e.g., the novella).

It was in the 1990s that Slovenian literary theory, through the efforts of Tomo Virk and Aleksander Kustec, truly began to focus on short narrative genres, perhaps as a result of their increasing presence. Pioneering studies in the area of short narrative prose were carried out even earlier by Gregor Kocijan.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly—and also under the influence of Kocijan's studies—anthologies of Slovenian and international short narrative prose began to appear in the 1980s, and especially proliferated in the 1990s.

*The Key Witnesses*—edited by Aleš Berger and with a foreword by Mitja Čander, an editor at Študentska založba and one of the central figures in the younger generation of Slovenian publishing today—also stems from this background. The volume contains twenty-three short stories (as opposed to novellas, from which they are distinguished by a beginning *in medias res*, an abrupt ending without a moral, a single key event with an unexpected twist, few literary characters—generally no more than three—and a limited setting in place and time). The collection begins and ends with stories from two women writers: Maja Novak's "This Story Should Have Been Written by Simenon" (from the collection *Wild Beasts*<sup>2</sup>) and Polona Glavan's "Hansel and Gretel," "Actually," and "Natte" (published in periodicals). The other stories are Andrej Morovič's "Calienta Braguetas," "Everything Is Going to Be All Right," and "In the Evening We Go Out Together" (from the collection *Divers*<sup>3</sup>), Jani Virk's "On the Border" ( *A Man Above the Precipice* <sup>4</sup>),

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002 the author of this review received her Ph.D. in this field with a dissertation entitled "The Contemporary Slovenian Short Story and Novella in Literary Studies and in School Practice."

<sup>2</sup> *Zverjad* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> *Potapljači* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1992).

Andrej Blatnik's "The Day of Independence," "Electric Guitar," and "The Surface" (from the collection *The Law of Desire*,<sup>5</sup> for which he was awarded the 2002 Prešeren Prize), Mart Lenardič's "Programme Plus" and "The Fighter" (from his second collection, *The Greater Gatsby*<sup>6</sup>), Tomaž Kosmač's "To See Žiri and Die" (*Diarrhea*<sup>7</sup>), Mohor Hudej's "Like Shit He Will," "To Serve or Not to Serve," and "The Director" (*Mumps at a Ripe Age*<sup>8</sup>), Dušan Čater's "Love-Seat," "History Is Written by The Winner," "First Day," and "The Forecast" (published in periodicals), and Aleš Čar's "Out of Order" and "The Floors" (*Out of Order*<sup>9</sup>).

The selection is appropriate: as the subtitle of the collection indicates, the editor chose from among Slovenia's younger writers, born between 1960 (Maja Novak and Andrej Morovič) and 1974 (Polona Glavan). This criterion automatically excluded many well-known Slovenian writers of short stories—such as Milan Dekleva, Franjo Frančič, Branko Gradišnik, Milan Kleč, Drago Jančar, Uroš Kalčič, Vinko Möderndorfer, and Milan Vincetič—that were already publishing in the 1980s when, as demonstrated by this author's own research, the short story was experiencing its apex in Slovenia, in comparison to the novella.

The afterword by Mitja Čander provides a condensed overview of postwar Slovenian prose, with a special emphasis on its development during the 1990s, when Slovenia achieved its independence and, at the same time, experienced a distinctive social decay. The authors born after 1960 developed a poetics that is differentiated and autonomous, and have shown themselves to be extreme individualists. Their writing reflects a neurotic and chaotic world and, at the same time, they show that they particularly treasure the story, by which they attempt to frame the perplexity of the world around us. Their stories seem simple, mundane, and intimate: stories that describe unimportant lives, places, streets, and living rooms—in short, what are known as "small stories." In Čander's view, love is one of the fundamental center-points of the stories, and it

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<sup>4</sup> *Moški nad prepadom* (Ljubljana: Mihelač, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> *Zakon želje* (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> *Še večji Gatsby* (Klagenfurt/Celovec: Wieser, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> *Driska* (Idrija: Bogataj, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> *Mumps v zrelih letih* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *V okvari* (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2003).

appears in various manifestations: for example, as a passionate sexual relationship in Mart Lenardič, as saturation and estrangement in Polona Glavan, as boredom—as well as hatred and sadomasochism—in Aleš Čar, and in the other writers as variations of these themes, coupled with coldness, depression, and fatalism. Čander concludes that “[n]ew achievements of the younger prose writers can be eagerly anticipated since some of the most outstanding ones have already created original and distinctive narrative worlds charged with an unusual and surprising energy” (173).

The volume concludes with biographical and bibliographic information about the authors.<sup>10</sup> The translators—Jure Novak, Erica Johnson Debeljak, Irena Zorko, Lili Potpara, Tamara M. Soban, and Sonja Kravanja—did their work well, but with certain translations were nonetheless unable to capture the rich differentiation between the spoken and literary forms of the Slovenian language. This is seen, for example, in Mart Lenardič, whose style is marked by linguistic excursions into conversational registers that extend as far as the lowest forms (including vulgarisms), marked word order,<sup>11</sup> archaic expressions such as *jeti* (= *začeti* ‘begin’), *dovesti* (= *pripeljati* ‘bring’), and *motriti* (= *opazovati* ‘examine’), Serbo-Croatianisms, and intertextual references, such as to Prešeren and Slovenian folk songs (in “Programme Plus”).

*The Key Witnesses: The Younger Slovene Prose at the Turn of the Millennia* provides an excellent view of contemporary Slovenian short prose by representatives of the youngest generation of writers, born after 1960. It demonstrates that Slovenian literature is following world trends both in literary genre as well as in its motifs and themes. It can only be hoped that, for those encountering Slovenian literature for the first time, this collection will create an awareness of and awaken interest in these seemingly small and unimportant narrative worlds.

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<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, not without typos (e.g. Morovič’s collection *Padalci* was published in 1991, not 1992).

<sup>11</sup> For example, on page 77 we read: “I woke up blissful and happy,” which omits the personification present in the original: “Prebujanje me je zalotilo blaženega in srečnega.”

