
From Roots to the Sky

Matej Bogataj

Nataša Kramberger stepped into the Slovenian literary landscape, in a manner of speaking, through a side door: ordinarily in Slovenia debut novels are written by authors shaped in creative writing workshops, who previously published short prose in magazines and were a part of the literary ‘scene,’ too (which means that, in discussions with their peers, they also formed a kind of stylistic orientation and shaped an image of what is considered contemporary and effective writing). In contrast, Kramberger’s novel in stories, *Blackberry Heaven*, was published as the winning manuscript at the Urška Slovenian Literary Festival for Young Authors. This is important because, at the time her debut novel was released, Kramberger’s literary voice was creative and distinctly original, unparalleled in the writings of previous generations, standing at once on the indeterminate boundary between clever and foreignizing, and between narrative strategies of high or tired modernism and genuine narrative naivety. But the quality of this style of writing was immediately recognized, as the novel was short-listed for the Kresnik Award for novel of the year when it came out and was later awarded the European Union Prize for Literature. In the afterward to the novel, critic Barbara Korun wrote that with it “we had been given an astonishingly powerful new literary voice.” As we will thoroughly return to the novel later, let me mention the rest of the

author's oeuvre, such as the collection of fragments entitled *Khaki Soldiers* (Založba Litera, 2011), which contains frequently agreeable rhymed verses, as in some lyrical young adult literature, and with occasionally elevated, enchanting and biblical language. It is about three different-colored currents and their authoritarian representatives, who are perched on a tree—on a kaki tree, which is the tree of the golden apple, and which somewhat resembles the planet ruled by Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince in its restraint, its microscopic completeness, and its concentration of problems in a small, transparent space—and who struggle: first to advance, then against intruders, and finally to prevail until the last breath. The kaki tree and all the crawlers and insects and digging moles are destroyed by ambition; there is too much activity in an environment full of discord, and just before the end it all goes to hell:

- I solemnly implore you, let everyone fight, let the kaki tree live forever!

In the strong northeastern wind that furiously uprooted the earth, kaki fireworks exploded from the tree. At least a thousand golden fruits flew into the sky and Green thought:

- That's awfully pretty.

It proceeds along the elusive and indeterminate boundary between genuine indignation, irony and satire, between the condemnation of worldly disputes and childish fervor set in a narrative of the world falling apart, and in some ways perhaps flirts with young adult literature. *Khaki Soldiers* talks about political exclusivity and intolerance, preparations for war and fighting, everything taking place in a very limited and therefore somewhat ridiculous world: nothing can really happen to the little man in that miniature and confined world; hence its high level of transparency

as the soldiers expose their strength and strut around one, before the other. And when we are almost finished reading *Khaki Soldiers* and everything seems kind of pleasantly simplistic, we are hit with an incantation. Prayer in the ancient and pantheistic sense, with echoes and litanies, is intended for the gods of the trees and the world with a plea for them to take care of us, because obviously we—people—do not know how to, despite everything we are entrusted with.

Khaki Soldiers represents a seeming turning point in Kramberger's writing, and its position and mooring in her oeuvre is supported and explained by her other works. Take, for example, her collection of columns and travelogues *Without a Wall*, subtitled *A Newspaper Narrative of Berlin and Other Places, 2004–2014*. It follows a series of written records inspired by her time abroad in her second home in Berlin, though the narratives also linger in the middle in a description of the author's first home, Jurovski Dol, a small hamlet in the northeast of Slovenia near the Austrian border, perhaps best known as the place of an attempted assassination on a second-place presidential candidate who had the same surname as the author, Kramberger. However, while dealing with her homes, both Slovenian and German, the work *Without a Wall* actually deals with the globalized world; its setting is the entire planet. For some time, Nataša Kramberger covered the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League for *Večer* [Evening], one of the three longstanding big Slovenian newspapers. She drove across Europe to do so, drove across Europe and beyond, later receiving a writing fellowship in Cuba and responding to invitations to tour across the Balkans, all these travels, and—because migration is our destiny—I repeat, she also recorded all of all these trips in writing.

Without a Wall is a collection of reportages dedicated to her mentor in the journalistic association, and is really a semi-literary contribution, a literary journalistic account that draws on the testimonies of people, and they are the caretakers of the memory of the breakup of Germany and its effects, which individuals wear on their sleeves, and she again visits sites of memory, such as concentration camps or abandoned East German nuclear power plants, etc. The collection always enhances a concrete experience with meaningful data, as well as history. Nataša Kramberger follows the trail left by, for example, Gabriel García Márquez and Ryszard Kapuscinski's oeuvre of reportage.

However, *Without a Wall* is not a travelogue of attractions, nor is it intended to glorify its own touristic ingenuity and daring in places where life should really be lived for the sake of danger; it is more of a report on the paradoxical state of the land. Meanwhile, Berlin, where the author resided after the fall of the wall, has undergone major changes. Not only are they desirable, but Berlin is no longer just about freedom of movement, easing fears of East German secret police and the like. Berlin has simply become cool, and mainly the wealthy and foreigners invest in it, namely, in real estate, which in turn raises the price of rent for locals, and, at the same time, is simply too expensive for native-born Berliners, who, even more easily than JFK, exclaim, "Ich bin ein Berliner." Yet Nataša Kramberger finds herself at cultural events, where visitors are warned about demonstrators on Labor Day, the first of May, when traditional protest festivities take place. The author then attends one of them with companions and like-minded people. Kramberger captures the lively pulse of the city, and with it draws portraits of its population; it is also vulnerable to the loss of social spaces, which are being

displaced by increasingly affluent neighborhoods; green spaces suffer, trees fall, construction sites and parking garages are created in place of parks, all of which impoverishes the possibilities of the people socially integrating and instead sets them apart, against which the author's sympathetically naïve activism is pointed.

Nataša Kramberger is also a young farm impresario, as bureaucrats say in the novel, and those pleasures serve as the basis for her novel *Comparable Hectares*, subtitled *A tale in a growing calendar*. The title itself was provided by agricultural bureaucracy, which, in return for the subsidies on which organic and smaller farmers live, requires them to utilize broad mechanization if they do not already own a good deal of land. Or it required that their land management be so intense that each of their hectares completely compensate for those hectares that they sow and fertilize and harvest.

Comparable Hectares is a book about the dilemmas of farming, weather difficulties, and pests, as well as sweet creatures like fawns, which get into the most fragile and delicate fruit flowers. It is a pleasant first-person testimony, almost a diary, about fighting red tape and especially about everything that is taken in and made smaller by hand and a sweaty hard-earned harvest; in this, it is somewhat reminiscent of farmstead literature, albeit in a modern and clever ironic form. From the grandmother's first statement that farmers are obliged to work, which then reverberates with every failure, the young farmer struggles with the land and with fatigue from manual, or at least not very mechanized, tillage. The bureaucrats send her a couple dozen pages of long lists of agricultural gibberish about machinery that she herself does not have, not at all, and they go to survey her plot of land to determine how it measures up to standards, and they fine people for everything that seems

natural and healthy to the narrator—blackberry bushes, disorderly, zigzagging, not in a straight line, in other words, planted orchard trees. Each side understands farming in a completely different way. Neighbors also root for modern agriculture, as they constantly try to persuade her that nothing will grow unless artificial fertilizer is used everywhere in substantial amounts, and, above all, unless it is sprayed far and wide; meanwhile, she helplessly opposes them with her ecological thinking.

In *Comparable Hectares*, Kramberger presents ecological realism, and in its inventories of fatigue, and sometimes in its despondency as well, which are overflowing with humor, it catalogues our relationship to the land, which is irresponsible at every level: they want to build a gas station next to a stream; and on her plot, the previous owners created a real black dumping ground for the most toxic substances, such as chemicals and asbestos, while all the clay pits are filled with garbage. However, the fight with the land in *Comparable Hectares* is not only a battle with our own illusions. Amidst all this, there is also a wealth of small pleasures, such as when birds hatch in a hollow tree trunk, when a trailer covers grains of barley, cultivated with their own hands—but also helped a little bit by neighbors with their farm machinery and advice. At the same time Kramberger is fighting on two fronts (also in Berlin, her home during the off-season, when the land rests), trees are disappearing from parks and green spaces due to speculative financial investments, and she creates death masks of tree stumps with rings that do not reveal their age but rather the traces of the electric saw, the traces of fatal wounds. *Comparable Hectares* is almost written in keeping with the adage “think globally, act locally,” and options for promoting a healthier, greener, and more friendly environment are

offered at every step. Because unfortunately, everything is wrong almost everywhere.

And it's not just the environment; it's also in culture and civilization. *Without a Wall* is a work of journalistic reportage, part of a genre that is disappearing at the same time as journalism itself becomes the domain of news agencies. All other content, since print media is more about money than mission and truth, is deemed too expensive and unnecessary.

Berlin is changing its image from the symbol of a divided Europe and the Cold War—a symbol that was torn apart with the Wall—and, after its fall, when more freedom was promised, this freedom became, above all, the freedom to rampage and force real estate prices up, raised by those who find living in Berlin distinguished. Thus, Kramberger sympathizes with the Vietnamese owner of a kiosk, where you can still buy things that have otherwise moved from downtown to shopping malls on the outskirts. She sympathizes with neighbors who are running out of money for the rent that has been raised several times, and she wonders how they do not find a solution for their crisis, but they are then more concerned with law and order, with thousands of special police officers coming out to break up demonstrations all across Germany, which certainly costs more than unpaid rent, which triggers eviction and these very demonstrations. The narrator, however, also remains misunderstood with her anachronistic and not very profit-driven farming at home in Jurovski Dol, where any consideration of further development is understood as braking and stubbornness.

Nataša Kramberger also published a small booklet, *Foreigners* (Zbirka Koderjana, 2016), in which poetry inspired by encounters with humans or animals is mixed with descriptions of an almost abandoned Slovenian

village on the Italian side of the western border, where they organize cultural gatherings that they want to revive with residency fellowships, which the author was also awarded. Once again, the author's gift of observation comes to the fore, and above all she tries to capture the pulse of the mysterious and alluring village of Topolovo, or Topolò in Italian—a village where few locals remain. Nataša Kramberger also recognizes the peculiarities of the dialect of this socially vacated territory, forgotten by God and authorities, between the plain of Padua and the northern coastal mountains along the Soča River, which is hosting festivals and similar cultural events in hopes of rousing and wresting itself out of oblivion and passing away, a fate many of the smaller villages in the area are subject to.

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“It's important that you always have
a kaleidoscope in your pocket”

Blackberry Heaven is Nataša Kramberger's first novel, which came out in 2007 and is subtitled *A Novel in Stories*, with which it already gestures toward its place dispersed in a fragmentary structure. Novels in stories, that is, overlapping stories, consist of fragments or smaller, completed stories, the sort with which the literary tradition is already familiar; such were the theoretical assumptions of some companions of Russian avant-garde art, and one of the more prominent story-tellers, Serbian author Milorad Pavić, described this mode fully and effectively in *The Dictionary of the Khazars*, which consists of individual completed slogans. However, *The Dictionary of the Khazars* can be opened almost anywhere, and slogans and characters can be traced through three different books (Jewish,

Christian, and Muslim), while *Blackberry Heaven* is more dramatically rounded. In *Blackberry Heaven*, we are masterfully led by the author through a labyrinth and through Romanesque narrations, whereby her editing process emphasizes repetition and variation, which can be described as looking at the same thing from different angles. One reading instruction is provided early on by Jana's mother: "It's important that you always have a kaleidoscope in your pocket, Mama said at just the right time."

Today, the kaleidoscope is an outdated toy in the age of the computer and virtual reality games. It is a tube, and turning it causes particles to be redistributed, refracted, and to overflow over surfaces, creating almost random but fascinating patterns. It is somewhat similar to images of chaos drawn by computers in color, in fractals. At the same time, the kaleidoscope is a window into the world of psychedelic patterns, by mixing colors and creating words that overlap and distort one another, all according to a logic inaccessible to the observer. The kaleidoscopic novel, or a novel in stories, would thus be written in accordance with the basic autopoetic saying of the prominent postmodern Slovenian poet Milan Jesih, who stated that in this type of writing, images overlap, one image ousts another. It is an accumulation of images and situations, stories that involve dispersal rather than focus. So that prose written in this way does not dissipate and lose its mimetic character, its adhesion to reality, as there are frequent repetitions and variations of some motifs in *Blackberry Heaven*.

From a formal point of view, the novel begins with a dedication where the names are first mentioned as roots, and it seems to us that those roots are meant to evoke tradition; it is therefore a dedication to the author's lineage, and to all that enable, support, and

nourish growth. It includes everything from popular oral literature and folklore, to proverbs accumulated in the language, which is of course the medium, the bearer of tradition. Nataša Kramberger adheres to tradition extensively, not only in the form of her invocation and her citation, but also in the frequent use of words in dialect, both Styrian and coastal, when it comes to the Friulian branch of the story, using archaic expressions and words that have been left on the sidelines and cast into oblivion by today's Slovenian standards. Surprisingly, the novel is dedicated to its origins, to its roots, and at the same time imbued with rhythmic and intense sonorous passages that reflect a metropolitan pulse and point to the fluid nature of today's urban spaces that allow for the mixing of cultures, languages, linguistic codes, the overflow of light—and, of course, a threatening power outage.

The novel is written in several parts, as echo and variation. The introductory sections are intended to go out into the world; among its many carriers, that is, actors in individual fragments, the image of departure appears several times: the daughter takes the bus, and the mother, despite her concerns, must take all the documents her daughter needs to leave home, catch up with the bus and pass it in her car, the legendary Golf, and with curlers in her hair, because her daughter's departure happens in a hurry. The writer is already suggesting that she will move into the comedic genre—a departure that could be immersed in tears of great renown shows haste, even a sense of unwillingness, and at the same time it seems to us that it is about expulsion from paradise, from home to world, a common Slovenian and probably also foreign folkloric motif of the native daughter, the tenth daughter (*Desetnica*), who has to leave home. Because home can no longer care for her.

At the same time, she travels around the world in the manner of medieval scholars and academics to acquire knowledge that is inaccessible to her at home.

The beginning of the novel is anchored in the domestic, and some scenes of rural life are represented as if from some kind of simple painting; in the socialist era, the field had its own style of simple painting, with particular emphasis on everyday domestic and peasant work. Kramberger's motifs are the same, namely, with regard to marginalized villagers, who lie in wait for the opportunity to get treats from fellow inhabitants, especially of a liquid variety: the hunt for a pig that manages to escape the slaughterhouse and then the most fearless must run after him to finish the job, and, happily, catch the draining blood for the blood pudding; the smuggling of household appliances from Austria and Italy is almost folkloric, though in *Blackberry Heaven* this is a less dangerous episode because a local customs officer is in on it. These believable and realistic scenes, filtered through a witty sieve, cut across the first part of the book: a rainstorm of global proportions, a great flood, if we exaggerate, in which electricity is lost, and we think that the same daughter, Jana, is now all of a sudden in Amsterdam, the babysitter of an Afro-Chinese child, holding a bag of apples (instead of the bike that was stolen from her), on which she wasted her last bit of money. Fragments of large watercourses follow, and about the growth of wild, untamed rivers from around the world, from Yunnan to Machu Pichu, from Urubamba to Pachamama and beyond, such that this blending of geography almost derails us. China, Latin America, the giants, and the floods lead to the emergence of fish from all the chaos, a fish with whiskers, a mute and invisible watchman of the world, hunted by everyone from the Styrian ponds

to the plain of Padua, across all the rivers of the world and through the canals of Amsterdam. Apples, fish, a great flood—a powerful symbol in itself; the apple is historically the most famous bait for expulsion from paradise and was the reason that the Lord commanded that in the sweat of our face we shall eat bread, by no means without effort and pain, so that life after expulsion will be only labor and drudgery, and this idea of expulsion from paradise is one of the most frequently repeated in *Comparable Hectares*. Korun wrote in an afterward about *Blackberry Heaven* that Kramberger's prose was cosmological, that she was, in other words, concerned with matters of creation and the end of the world. That she laid out the whole world in her debut novel, together with the threat of its downfall.

However, this world is also internal. The unity of these fragments gives the narrator consciousness, which, by association and dream logic, moves from her homeland to the streets of Amsterdam, in the dark, due to power outages, and to canals there, where she picks up pieces of other stories. Let's look at the one with the young Turkish men, who move a bathtub that escapes them in the same way that the local butchers' pig escapes slaughter. To emphasize that this is something incomprehensible, but also funny, this scene is very picturesque, and onomatopoeically recorded. Among the words that are being exchanged by agitated and unskilled bathtub movers, between other incomprehensible utterings and onomatopoeia mimicking wailing, the word MILLION! appears, which refers right away to the damage, of course, through the prism of bargaining at an Oriental bazaar, where the price is extremely high, so that through intense bargaining, it would drop to the real one.

Parallels, similar to the one between a runaway bathtub in Amsterdam and the clumsy amateur slaughter in

Slovenske Gorice, are quite common in the novel. These are mirrored points where one event is enlightened by another, and at the same time such analogous situations are also points of transition, at which thought can skip across time and continents by associative logic. One example is Jana's trek across a pitch black Amsterdam, where an arch reminds her of the house where she practiced piano:

She walked on damp cobblestones toward Amstel Street past a disgusting façade with faces that her sparse light made even scarier, and the arch made her think of the Kraner cottage, which was no longer there.

When she used to go practice piano at the school by her house, when she was seven, eight years old, she went alone to the music classroom, in the evenings, because she did not have a piano at home, and darkness in her village was black as death.

The gloomy space, which fills her with fear, is in this case a springboard, the story moves from Amsterdam to a memory from more than a decade ago; it is a typical reminiscence, a trigger similar to the tea-soaked madeleine in Marcel Proust's monumental prose opus.

In *Blackberry Heaven*, we can follow several stories through three sections and additional parts; one consists of Jana's memories of home and her departure to a world that, first of all, features extensive expulsion from paradise—in Amsterdam, where she is working as a babysitter, everything goes wrong for her when a power outage hinders her movement, and as a matter of fact, she is late bringing the child home, where they are particularly sensitive to delays, in the absence of money and in the fact that her bicycle was stolen from her and she has to buy another one from those who stole it from her, she is also threatened by immigration officers with a summons saying that she must pay for a visa and the

penalty for undeclared days of residence just two weeks before visa requirements are lifted for her country, so she feels threatened by the authorities at every meeting with those in uniform. However, things are sorted out when Bepi, the carrier of a parallel storyline, who was waiting at the airport for his granddaughter—whose mother was and will remain a hippie, and who now has to go to school, so they must go file paperwork—saves her from a difficult situation at a governmental office. All three meet at the Immigration Office, and are immediately comrades in arms during a bit of misfortune: Bepi proposes that Jana serve her sentence by tutoring his granddaughter, who is preparing for school. It seems that the group of three along the Amsterdam canal in the houseboat find refuge in a place named after a fantastic cat, Sarajevo. A temporary and fragile alliance found in a substitute home. So, in retrospect, we can understand all the fantastic landscapes, these are places of Bepi's emigration somewhere in Venice, the places where he fell in love, the rivers where he hunted for the fish with whiskers and a white belly and where they swallowed small fish as an initiation test, and the like. Bepi has thus been found as a "substitute" for Oma's wisdom and her ingenuity and practicality; he is himself tolerant and understanding, and his caring for young people puts him the position of an elder, a sage, a teacher.

However, the novel is not just a mix of stories that bring Jana and Bepi together, but also one in which she also finds herself a psychologically unstable landlord who, despite a medical condition, drives a car and then goes off into the unknown, or into the story of the descendent of free English keelmen who floated along the canals of Amsterdam. The novel covers wide ground and moves between continents and generations, paying tribute to the peculiarities of Jana's and Bepi's

ancestors, and, in passing through the generations and the peculiarities of the figures, though roughly drawn, is almost a saga.

Blackberry Heaven records past coincidences that have enabled so many different people to meet and share their fate with strangers, as well as the causes that propelled both protagonists and others into the world. The causes—literalized and lifted up into the sky—can be seen from both (nearly) final fragments, the one in which the idea of heaven and its unattainability occurs to Jana, and the one in which we see Bepi's impulse to leave home and search for the bottom of the world. Just before the end of the novel, the author writes what, as a matter of fact, fundamentally drives both of her protagonists, Jana and Bepi: the former stands against the tradition of her parents, and so is all the more reliant on her grandmother's footprints. Jana first suffered baptism as child's play when she was "baptized" by a friend of hers, nicknamed the "church mouse" (as rural people tend to call invisible, gray-haired, and religiously enraptured people), and enrolled in catechism to become more acquainted with the mysteries of faith, including mysterious incense, which she begins to miss in a foreign world, and in this we see where Jana's motivation lies, and what drives her (around the world).

At that moment, the church mouse broke the silence, rose to her elbows, looked at her seriously, nodded knowingly, and sighed like an adult:

- You know, you'll slowly come to understand it, too. Heaven is not of this world. It is in another dimension.

She uttered the word with such ease that Jana's head spun with her own ignorance. She blinked three times and thought deeply.

The clock in the bell tower read ten past two and the sun shone sideways. She pulled a black sweater over her head, which had been lent to her by the church mouse,

whose sister had lent it to her. Through the wooden slits, the sun shone at intervals and the light spun. For a brief moment, everything, the stream, the oak tree, the funeral, the parrot, disappeared and she saw only colors, colors, colors, through the woolen threads of the black sweater, the colors, the colors, heaven, heaven in the clouds, away from this world in another dimension.

From that moment on, that second dimension no longer gave her peace. What is it, where is it, how do you get there. ... And it was like that until she left.

This is immediately followed by Bepi's version: Dino and Gino go fishing in the Tagliamento River, where, with difficulty and rather clumsily, they catch a miraculous fish with whiskers and a white belly. There is so much flesh on this fish that it could feed people all the way to Venice, and then Bepi asks Gino what the two had been mumbling to a lively fish, when fish are always quiet:

Gino laughed wryly and bit in slowly, he wrinkled up the skin on his forehead and he had an elongated scar on his ear:

- Bepi, don't worry, you'll know it one day, too. No need for words to understand the language. And fish always swim at the bottom of the world.

He said it so lightly that darkness closed in on Bepi's brain out of his own ignorance. All confused, he threw himself back on the pebbles and instead of fire ahead of him he saw only the shining flames waving. For a brief moment everything was gone, the fish, the son of a bitch, Dino, papa, all that remained were the waves, waves, waves, through the fire and into the river, waves, waves, swimming amidst fish and languages, at the bottom of the Tagliamento, at the bottom of the river, between the waves, at the bottom of the world.

From that moment on, the bottom of the world no longer gave him peace. What is it, where is it, how do

you get there, to the bottom of the world. Everyone told him something different.

The fish, however, were silent.

If we follow and believe the story, Jana and Bepi find themselves on the same path. Did not already Heraclitus say that the way up and the way down is one and the same, that descent into hell and the kingdom of darkness is equal to the ascension into heaven among gods, and was thus called *The Obscure*? Now it seems that they are a surrogate family and that they have at least reached a temporary consolation—that girl from both Slovenske Gorice and the Friulian region who grew up near the Tagliamento River and set off on a journey around the world in search of the superlative, the mysterious. Instead of being expelled, Jana finds herself in the wise company of Bepi and his grandchild, who protect her from being punished for the crime of living in the Netherlands without a visa. She is, however, faced with a less problematic child to look after and, on top of that, she possesses a full bag of apples. Apples are a leitmotif of sorts in this novel, and this leitmotif is introduced already in the first line (“She bought apples instead of a bicycle.”); also, the couple from the concluding scene drives on a moped to an apple orchard. For Nataša Kramberger, apple orchards are a sort of Chekhovian *Cherry Orchard*. To Oma’s horror, the new owner cuts down and substantially shrinks the orchard that serves as both a place of nostalgia and an image of new barbarity over nature, thus paralleling the main theme in Chekhov’s play. In Chekhov, an old aristocratic family’s estate is to be auctioned off to pay off their debts. Lopakhin, who is of peasant and serf stock, suggests that much of the cherry orchard could be razed so that space could be made for summer cottages. *The Cherry Orchard* is, like the author’s other

plays, a manifestation of a lack of respect for “roots,” tradition, and nature. In *Blackberry Heaven*, we follow the fate of two orchards: one is being cut down, the other provides abundant crops of berries.

The author makes her debut novel ecological, with a particular fondness for green, increasingly threatened areas; the felling of trees in an orchard is recognized as inappropriate and inconsistent with tradition, and at the same also an action that defies future trends. Ultimately the apple orchard is a place where a grandmother rides around on a moped, a grandmother who is the soul of this novel and a counselor for her granddaughter, an inexperienced young farmer in the various life challenges and trials recorded in other books in the author’s oeuvre. The last important and significant image in the novel is that of Oma; she is presumably the torchbearer of this wise and sustainable tradition, guardian and bearer of those “roots” to which the novel is dedicated; as the fish with whiskers and a white belly are in some ways the link between Jana’s and Bepi’s longing, even though they are at the bottom, they aim to—with enough rain—swim off toward the sky. With such images, Nataša Kramberger evokes the magical and mysterious, and at the same time magic and realism, old beliefs and a crawling metropolis. Because everything is one thing, which also reveals the structure of the novel.

However, her prose is not only melancholic. It has wild rhythms, onomatopoeia, swirls of interjections and syllables in some places, as they mimic rumors of wealth in the capital of one of the former superpowers, people from her hometown are also precisely and vividly drawn, serving as a contrast to Amsterdam, the city to which the mysterious paths of fate have led everyone from a Surinamese woman working at a cybercafé to a biracial child, the city where throaty Dutch names

resound even as the memory of Jana's native Slovenian dialect remains. Nataša Kramberger is known for her use and mastery of many linguistic registers, proving again and again her remarkable storytelling and linguistic prowess.