
A Provisional Guide to the Short Story Selection

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The oldest story in this book, *A Night in Ljubljana* by Lela B. Njatin, was written in 1994 for an anthology to “mark” James Joyce’s “night in Ljubljana”. This involves a little known, slightly bizarre detail in the life of the great Irish author: when he and his new wife were fleeing from their home country to Trieste, they by mistake got off the train in the provincial capital of Ljubljana and spent the night there, waiting for the departure of the next train. The context of this story, together with how the author developed it, seems meaningful. The literary generation which first appeared upon the literary scene during the 1980s and which was born mainly between 1955 and 1969, chose this small fragment of a big story as, it seems, a harbinger of a literary period in which there was a departure from the big historical picture, in which heroes were replaced by everyman, the nation by the local community and ideas by intimate stories. Lela B. Njatin’s story perhaps best demonstrates this radical shift, for instead of someone else’s big story, she offers a first-person account of her own night in some indifferent foreign town.

The generations that followed (among the writers of the stories in this book there are a few who fall within the generation announcing the change of paradigm, but who entered the literary scene later) did not establish themselves as generations, did not publish together and only found themselves together for the odd anthology aimed at the “foreign market”. The reason for this is simple: the new generations did not need any manifestoes, as the predecessors mentioned above had ensured that they had “formal and legal” independence from previous literary generations. Entering the literary scene became simpler, at least in principle, which is also demonstrated by the fact that in this anthology, in addition to stories by already “confirmed” authors (even by the Prešeren Fund

Award, the highest award in Slovenia for contemporary artistic achievement, of which one recipient is Suzana Tratnik), includes stories by authors who have barely been noticed by Slovene literary circles (or whose ability to write short stories has been hitherto unrecognised), but whom the editor clearly felt it natural to highlight.

Another reason for the lack of joint appearances can be found within literature itself and is more general, in the sense that other literary scenes also encounter it. After the highly effective, but ephemeral post-modernist boom, no new literary direction was created, even though theorists tried very hard to identify the common distinguishing features of the “newcomers”. After the big -isms, the least harmful and reducible classification for them seemed “minimalist intimism”, while their common denominator was description of the non-fatal, perpetuated, weary existence of everyman in his everyday incapacity. However, the stories in this book alone clearly show that minimalism is only one aspect of a much more complex picture and the ways of describing intimate lives too different for us to be able to unify them. We have been offered a few true Slovene minimalist stories inspired by Raymond Carver’s anxiety (initiated by Andrej Blatnik, who was later followed by several other storytellers), but in this selection there are hardly any “typical representatives” (with the exception of *A Night in Ljubljana*, and later outlets perhaps in the stories *Summer Couple 2006* by Nejc Gazvoda and *Chicken* by Irena Svetek). I assume that the editor did not make the selection on the basis of certain, let us say, “spiritual-historic” criteria, but was interested mainly in the fact that the authors or rather their work had not yet been translated.

Thus, most of the stories in this book indeed describe intimate relationships between subjects, but mostly not in the minimalist “less is more” manner. The methods used are very diverse and the narrative patterns originate in various styles and tendencies. We come across strategies derived from fairytales (*Fruit* by Nina Kokelj), mythology (*Aegeus* by Veronika Simoniti), anecdote (*The Mobile Phone* by Lili Potpara and *The Piano* by Sebastijan Pregelj) and “confession” (*Talk to Me about Me* by Norma Bale, *Bitch* by Lenart Zajc or *Lighthouse* by Damijan Šinigoj).

The only attempt at unifying this generation in recent years was the anthology *O čem govorimo?* (What do we talk about?)

and even this, as already noted, is more of a “translation” of anthologies of modern Slovene short stories in certain foreign languages. Of course, the Carveresque title (we all know *What we talk about when we talk about Love*) expresses the quandary of an editor who would like to find a common denominator in the stories, and in the end finds a temporary shelter for the writers involved in “neo-realism”. This was a brave attempt, but a “shift towards realism” can be advocated only as a shift away from post-modernist wanderings among fictional (and thus not “realist”) worlds. It may seem to us that these intimate worlds “exist very near you”, but for true realism, even if it is prefixed with neo-, these worlds lack an insight into proximity, that is into the (social) environment, they lack that which is established by the environment, the relations that are not limited only to the ego’s private corner. It seems that neo-realism – and “neo-” in this connection means, above all, that contemporary storytellers, in order to achieve realist effects, also make good use of the “anti-realist” findings of the 20th century, particularly surrealism – has slowly started a shy awakening, although in this collection its most important shoots (Andrej E. Skubic and Polona Glavan) can not be found. The only exception could be the stories of Suzana Tratnik, whose “realism” stems from a decision to describe marginal, minority social practices. A different attempt at a renewed realism can also perhaps be sensed in *The Lady in the Park* by Orlando Uršič, where the writer manages to draw a wider social picture from an omniscient authorial perspective.

This certainly is not the whole story of this non-generational generation. Any temporary shelter (this was the title of a book of interviews with the members of this generation still establishing itself as a generation) seems increasingly temporary. Now, entering the scene happens simply as the consequence of a request to “let me tell my story, too”. And yes, it is good that these stories are being told.

Translated by David Limon