

BOOKS FROM LITHUANIA

2023–2024

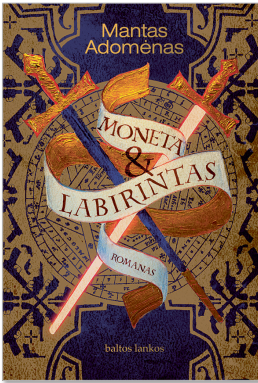
FICTION and NON - FICTION

Another year has come full circle, and once again there's a stack of books. All of them could be called, borrowing the subtitle of Alvydas Šlepikas's short story collection, 'stories from different times'. The books are very diverse, yet most of them are united by the present-day, with all its attributes and the shadow of wars weighing upon our times, sewing itself into everyday life with a heavy and oppressive lining. Perhaps the current geopolitical tensions and anxiety over Europe's changed security architecture have led to Lithuanian literature being enriched with as many as four spy novels in under two years (novels by Mantas Adomėnas and Bernardas Gailius). A genre that did not exist and could not exist in Lithuanian literature due to the 50-year Soviet occupation, and which is now so much in need again, when finding new ways of dealing with the hostile and malevolent forces once again actively operating in our world is so essential. In general, probably every book presented speaks, in its deepest narrative layer, about the fundamental existential struggle between good and evil, for beauty, light, and hope. And for better versions of ourselves in a better world.

FICTION

MANTAS ADOMÉNAS | MONETA IR LABIRINTAS

Novel, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, Part I: 2023, 573 pp.; Part II: 2024, 559 pp.



The Coin and the Labyrinth

So, this plot should be much more a mystery novel, a detective or spy novel, trying to interpret true reality (if such a tautology is possible) through the ambiguous markers of everyday life, piecing together a complete picture from fragments, trying to decipher secret intentions and to discern the answer to a question which he himself does not yet fully know. It is a plot that allows one to participate in the deep geopolitical-metaphysical intrigue of the present day, in the Great Game of the here and now. (p. 124)

A thriller of ideas, this novel is a long, multilayered, and multidimensional investigation conducted by Tomas Narvydas (an intelligence officer from the Department of Deep Geopolitics within the Lithuanian security services) into the death of his friend, teacher, and mentor Leonas Nevardauskas. Why did a man disliked by Russia's security structures, who avoided Russia, suddenly find himself alone and helpless in the harsh climate of the city of Nizhnedvinsk? Who is responsible for his death, and why? These questions spark up the extensive investigation known as "Operation Devil's Finger", detailed across the two volumes of "Moneta ir labirintas" (The Coin and the Labyrinth). This philosophical spy novel is rich in intertextual linings and is filled with literary and cultural references. It deconstructs the esoteric thinking that is so characteristic of and widely spread within Moscow's power network. The timelines of the duology extend far into the past: the first volume reaches back to the origins of the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis, Tomas's studies at Vilnius University, and Vilnius in the latter half of the 1980s. The second volume, in an attempt to decipher the deep geopolitical scheme and the Kremlin's magical structure, delves as far back as 15th-century Europe, which was facing serious dilemmas about its geopolitical future. It is a novel of great ambition, contexts, and diverse geographical settings, depicting not only the characters' growth but also the development of the independent Lithuanian state. It is a story about freedom and its (im)possibilities, about espionage and counterintelligence, about Vilnius, a city where many intelligence paths intersect due to its geographical position, and about the Third Rome, ultimately about the eternal struggle between good and evil. (NB: The duology's first volume ends with what may be the best cliffhanger in Lithuanian literature yet.)

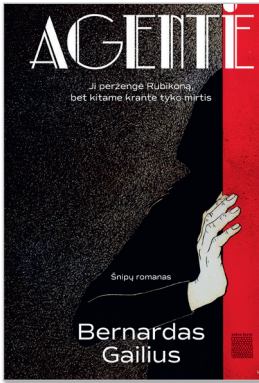
MANTAS ADOMÉNAS is a politician; he earned his master's degree as a Classicist at Vilnius University and obtained a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Cambridge. In 2024, Adomėnas became Secretary General of the Community of Democracies. The intellectual spy novel duology, "Moneta ir labirintas" (The Coin and the Labyrinth), marked his literary debut and instantly became a bestseller.

AWARDS: The duology's first volume was selected as the Prose Book of the Year, in the 2023 edition of the Book of the Year Awards. The first volume was shortlisted among the Twelve Most Creative Books of 2023.

KEYWORDS: intellectual spy novel; the Great Game; deep geopolitics; Moscow's power network; the Third Rome; intelligence as the soul of the state; magical thinking; the battle between good and evil.

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BERNARDAS GAILIUS | AGENTĖ
Spy novel, Vilnius: Aukso žuvis, 2024, 411 pp.



Spy Woman

But, along that path, what mattered more: the revolutionary struggle for children's and grandchildren's futures, or a lonely girl's desire to live a life offering at least some joy? (p. 74)

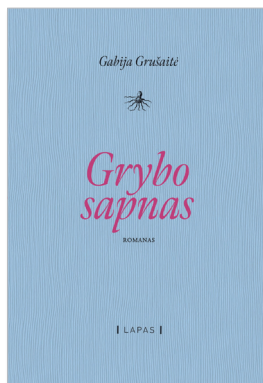
This spy novel takes us back to interwar Kaunas: it's 1938, the opposition to the then President of Lithuania, Antanas Smetona, along with efforts to form a coalition to overthrow him, are growing stronger. However, opposition leaders are not the only ones with plans; underground communists are also scheming. One of them, Angelė Treigyte, a trained communist and graduate of the International Lenin School, becomes this story's protagonist. Having realised that her party activities are no longer as successful as they used to be, she resolves to act behind the communists' backs to pursue her own desires: she embarks on a double game, becoming the Lithuanian Mata Hari, uniquely influencing the life of the State Security Department intelligence agent, Konstantinas Astrauskas. Agent Angelė talks about the work of security agencies in interwar Lithuania (the author was inspired by the memoirs of Jonas Budrys, a pioneering figure within counterintelligence operations in the interwar Republic of Lithuania); about intelligence gathering as the art of free will; about the communists, who operated invisibly yet convincingly; and about manipulations and dangerous spy games (the greatest danger, as always, was Moscow). In Gailius's novel, Europe's ominous predicament and the approaching Second World War loom in the background, but at the forefront is a compelling portrait of interwar Kaunas and the glamorously vibrant life of that era.

BERNARDAS GAILIUS is a historian and journalist. In his doctoral thesis and his first book "Partizanai tada ir šiandien" (Partisans Then and Today, 2006), he studied the Lithuanian partisan war and its legal, political and cultural consequences. He dedicated his book "Nusikaltimai prie Smetonos" (Crimes Under Smetona, 2008) to the history of crime and the intelligence services. His studies of the thriller genre are summarized in the book "Džeimsas Bondas. Mitas ir politika" (James Bond. Myth and Politics, 2017). His first spy novel, "Kraujo kvapas" (The Smell of Blood), was published in 2022. "Agentė" (Spy Woman) is Gailius's second spy novel.

KEYWORDS: espionage thriller; the Lithuanian Mata Hari; Soviet terror; communist conspiracy; double games; intrigue of decision-making; the history of intelligence operations.

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GABIJA GRUŠAITĖ | GRYBO SAPNAS
Novel, Vilnius: Lapas, 2023, 384 pp.



The Mycelium Dream

Everything is already fine. Even in this meat grinder. The fungal dream propels us forward or keeps us stuck in the past. And at the same time, it's infinitely beautiful. The most beautiful movie in the world, which each of us watch in an intimate hall of solitude. (p. 371)

Gabija Grušaitė continues her exploration of contemporary life and the *homo postsovieticus*, projecting her attention towards a foreseeable, elegantly dystopian future. The story unfolds along two narrative lines set in 2025 and 2051, respectively, both unified by the Mycelium Dream – a Nobel Prize-winning theory by scientist Dustin Carter about humanity's connection with the *Vyrdiceps mycelium*. This mycelium is posited as being responsible for human consciousness and mind, influencing everything: reality's illusions, the filter through which we see the world, self-awareness and self-reflection, our relationship with others and life itself. The characters illustrate this theory as they experience conflicting relationships with themselves and others, tirelessly trying to manoeuvre between desires and imposed obligations, between joy and anxiety, tranquillity and inner instability – because the mycelium both gives and takes away. Combining dystopia (a memorable vision of the future) with a fictional scientific theory, while speaking the language of the mycelium, “Grybo sapnas” (The Mycelium Dream) tells the stories of people navigating the labyrinths of contemporary trends in vogue, attempting to overcome the self-destructive dangers of the everyday and seeking to answer (the novel's) most important question: why is it so hard to be true to oneself? The different answers from the novel's varied cast of characters testify to the variety of worlds we carry within us and how similar they ultimately are.

GABIJA GRUŠAITĖ was born in Vilnius, and studied media and anthropology in London. She spent seven years living in Malaysia, where she co-founded an independent arts centre, Hin Bus Depot. She is the author of two novels: “Neišsipildymas” (Unfulfillment, 2010) and “Stasys Šaltoka” (Cold East, 2017). “Stasys Šaltoka” was translated into English (2018) and Ukrainian (2022), received the Jurga Ivanauskaitė and Penang Monthly literary awards, and was nominated for the Book of the Year. In 2023, Gabija Grušaitė published her first children's book, “Grozis ir Heizelis” (Beauty and Hazel). “Grybo sapnas” (The Mycelium Dream) is her third novel.

KEYWORDS: *Vyrdiceps mycelium* language; post-Soviet legacy; the tapestry of contemporary life; tales of solitude; inherited incomprehensions; why is it so hard to be true to oneself; the future that awaits us in the fight against climate change.

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SIGITAS PARULSKIS | KAIP AŠ MEČIAU
Novel, Vilnius: Alma littera, 2024, 224 pp.



How I Quit

<...> finally, when you look back at your life, you see that it is a tangle of stories, and you remember only part of those stories, just fragments. So you sit like a child before a puzzle, trying to piece together the missing parts, and you arrange only the stories that are dear to you, because the ones that aren't dear emerge from the darkness on their own, finding their way into your nocturnal vigils when it feels like your head will explode like a watermelon <...>. (p. 74)

The novel's narrator, Sigitas, decides to quit smoking, and this decision to give up a fiendishly pleasurable addiction (as the narrator says, people don't want to quit because it's either a pleasure or a misery) unexpectedly draws him into an inner, all-encompassing journey down memory lane – an incessant conversation with his own mind. The hero delves into his memory like an archaeologist, unearthing the past's variegated layers and plotlines. This novel is an archaeology of the past, composed of episodes of pain, melancholy, love, and joy as well as reflections on life's binary oppositions, key to Parulskis's work: life and death, spirit and body, Eros and Thanatos, youth and old age, the sacred and the profane, memory and oblivion. It is a tapestry of unsentimental, somewhat uncomfortable metaphors that draw attention to the darker side of the world and the soul. This novel transcends genre boundaries; it abounds in poetry, essays, memoirs, the prose of life, and the solitude of the creator – the central motifs of Parulskis's poetry and prose. By narrating the desire to overcome addiction, Parulskis shows that our greatest addictive relationship is with life itself and the stories that compose it.

SIGITAS PARULSKIS is a poet, prose writer, playwright, columnist, and one of Lithuania's best-selling contemporary authors. A recipient of the National Prize for Culture and Arts. In 1990, he made his debut with his poetry collection "Iš ilgesio visa tai" (All of This from Longing), and soon afterwards he wrote his first plays. In 2002, Parulskis published his first prose works – the essay collection "Nuogi drabužiai" (Naked Clothes) and the novel "Trys sekundės dangaus" (Three Seconds of Heaven). During the course of his 30-year literary career, he has written over 20 books. Over the past decade, he has been writing prose and publishing opinion articles.

KEYWORDS: conversations with one's own mind; grotesque autofiction; journey of the imagination; the dark side of human nature; layers of memory; memories are an illusion of time; living in stories.

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UNDINĖ RADZEVIČIŪTĖ | PAVOJINGI ŽODŽIAI
Novel, Vilnius: Lithuanian Writers' Union Publishing House, 2023, 178 pp.



Dangerous Words

“And who can tell us which words are the right ones?” asked Aunt Hedvyga. (p. 176)

Undinė Radzevičiūtė’s latest story unfolds within the theatre world: upon the death of a theatre director, another director takes over the staging of a rarely performed Giuseppe Verdi opera, notorious for its aura of superstition, and leads the entire creative team down a new path of exploration that puts the whole troupe through its paces. This is shaped not only by the dangerous power of words and the perils of superstition but also by the theatricality of life’s intrigues. By exposing the inner microcosm of the theatre, replete with a dense web of love, hate, and games of influence, Radzevičiūtė crafts a compelling portrait of our times and customs, which also reflects the recent years we have lived through: from the Covid pandemic to the war in Ukraine. As is customary for Radzevičiūtė, the novel provides a space where her protagonists meet to have a proper conversation, and even a verbal sparring match. But... In “Pavojingi žodžiai” (Dangerous Words), Radzevičiūtė’s distinctive irony transforms into sharp satire, targeting today’s most fashionable attributes: political correctness, the equal importance of every opinion, new sensitivities, feigned openness, the new ideology aiming to format our minds, the present’s all-pervasive phenomenon of relevance, and, of course, cancel culture.

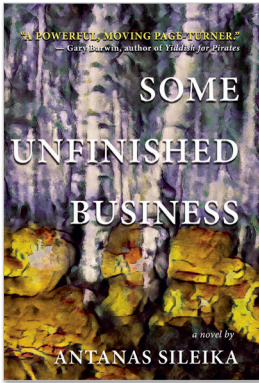
UNDINĖ RADZEVIČIŪTĖ is the internationally acclaimed author of eight novels and a collection of short stories. Her books have been shortlisted for the Most Creative Book of the Year seven times, on one occasion winning the accolade for her novel “Grožio ir blogio biblioteka” (The Library of Beauty and Evil, 2020). Her works have been nominated for Best Lithuanian Book of the Year four times. In 2015, her novel “Žuvys ir drakonai” (Fishes and Dragons, 2013) was awarded the European Union Prize for Literature and is considered one of the best books of the decade. Radzevičiūtė is also one of the most widely translated Lithuanian authors.

AWARDS: shortlisted among the Top Five Prose Books of the Year in 2023; shortlisted among the Twelve Most Creative Books of 2023.

KEYWORDS: satire of our times and culture; theatre intrigues and dangerous words; virtue warriors; Sensitive Issues; importance of chiaroscuro; power of words; text for strengthening common sense and critical thinking.

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ANTANAS ŠILEIKA | SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS
Novel, Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2023, 302 pp.



Some Unfinished Business

“The past is a dangerous place. If you don’t put him behind yourself, you’ll dwell on him. He’ll poison your future. You’ll still be young when you get out of prison. Do you want to devote your life to revenge?”

“The man killed my friend. He betrayed me too. I just want to bring him to justice.”

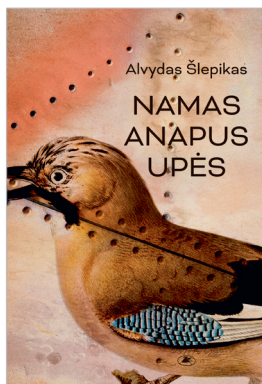
Povilas waved his hand dismissively. “Justice takes a long time. You’re better off letting it go.” (p. 226)

The latest novel by Antanas Šileika is a story about settling the scores of World War II and historical events, in all their painful circumstances. It is about the unfinished business between Martin Averka and his teacher Kostas. In 1957, having spent ten years in the Gulag, Martin returns to Soviet-occupied Lithuania and tries to rebuild his life. However, he cannot find peace due to his urge to take revenge on his former teacher Kostas, who, in 1947, came to Martin’s native village of Lyn Lake and inspired him to dream of a future beyond the village’s confines. Martin introduced Kostas to the partisans hiding in the surrounding forests. But the young man did not know that Kostas was a KGB agent sent to Lyn Lake to infiltrate the partisan underground and eliminate their leader. Kostas’s painful betrayal led not only to the deaths of the partisans but also to Martin’s deportation to Siberia. Having returned to Vilnius, Martin starts a family. When fate gives him a chance to escape from the Lithuanian SSR, he finally meets his former teacher, the betrayer, for one last conversation. Šileika’s novel is based on the painful and harrowing life story of the popular post-war children’s writer Kostas Kubilinskas (who was recruited by Soviet security services, betrayed known partisan hideouts in the Varėna District, and shot the leader of the Šarūnas partisan unit: the poet Benediktas Labėnas).

ANTANAS ŠILEIKA is a Canadian writer of Lithuanian descent who writes in English. He has published seven books of fiction and a memoir in Canada, with six of his books being translated into Lithuanian. He was the director of the Humber School for Writers in Toronto before retiring to devote himself to writing. His novel “Underground” was included in *The Globe and Mail’s* Top 100 Books of 2011. His memoir “The Barefoot Bingo Caller” won the Book of the Year award in Lithuania in 2018. In 2023, his novel “Provisionally Yours” (“Laikiniai jūsu”, 2019) was adapted for film.

KEYWORDS: the past cannot be changed; but scores can be settled; no one is innocent; collaboration with the Soviets; the weight of history; post-war Vilnius; the Book Chamber; the fates’ secrets.

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The House Over the River: Stories from Different Times

No, there's nothing there, nothing at all; that house is empty, those shadows and figures—just figments of the imagination, hallucinations brought on by fatigue. There's nothing there, nothing. (p. 32)

It is often said that a good short story should be like a dream, or leave a dream-like impression on us. In this book by Alvydas Šlepikas, there are seven such dreams – not necessarily divinely beautiful or brightly hopeful, with some even teetering on the edge of evoking an oppressive nightmare. These short stories are deeply infused with present-day anxieties (the war in Ukraine, climate change) and the fragility of existence, in the face of which the protagonists seek out connection with one another (a father and son's journey; a small boy fleeing the front line with his aunts), attempting to avoid the end of the world, which ultimately arrives nonetheless, albeit in an imperceptibly minute way. Almost all the situations depicted unfold on the delicate boundary between life and death, exposing human emotions and instincts, the soul's dark side. Each story contains an unexpected plot twist that infuses the text with an existential perspective, sometimes allowing glimpses into the abyss of another world. From beauty to horror, from fleeing to settling in and tranquillity—such is the trajectory of this book and its characters as they move through the world, reminding us that alongside life's cruelties, there is always unexpected magic and a mystery that guards the core of human existence.

ALVYDAS ŠLEPIKAS is a poet, prose writer, screenwriter, and director. He is the author of three poetry collections and four books of short stories. Šlepikas's novel "Mano vardas – Marytė" (2012), which brought him numerous awards, became not only a Lithuanian bestseller (with thirteen editions) but also an international one. The novel has been translated into eleven languages; the English edition, entitled "In the Shadow of Wolves", was listed among *The Times* best books of the year in 2019. In 2016, Šlepikas was awarded the Antanas Vaičiulaitis Prize, often referred to as the Lithuanian Nobel Prize for short stories.

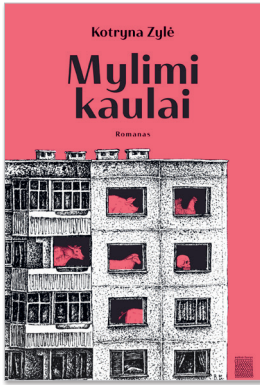
AWARDS: Shortlisted among the Top Five Prose Books of the Year in 2023; shortlisted among the Twelve Most Creative Books of 2023.

KEYWORDS: short story as a dream; present-day anxieties; the borderline between life and death; the mysteries of existence; plot twist; what awaits us all.

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KOTRYNA ZYLĖ | MYLIMI KAULAI

Novel, illustrated by Bernardas Burba, Vilnius: Aukso žuvis, 2024, 188 pp.



Beloved Bones

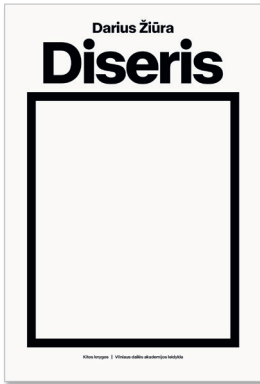
But it's up to me alone to decide the fate of my beloved husband; why is it acceptable to preserve dogs and shrews, to keep them on shelves, but our loved ones must be shoved underground straight away? He's mine, he will stay by my side, I will finish all our unlived years together, as long as I myself last. (p. 149)

“Mylimi kaulai” (Beloved Bones) is the life story of Ona, who keeps the bones of her three men in her closet at home, encompassing 63 years of her life. It is a coming-of-age and love novel infused with Lithuanian mythology, unfolding in the landscapes of modern-day Vilnius apartment blocks where livestock is kept in flats and tended by shepherds, where a communal sauna exists in the building’s basement, and misfortunes are resolved by the wisewoman Motė. It is a marvellous world of ancient rituals and an agrarian worldview, yet existing in contemporary times. The novel is ingeniously structured to reveal the most important relationships in Ona’s life: with her father; her neighbour Lukas; Motė, the building’s highest authority; and Mikas, the husband Ona won in a lottery who became the greatest love of her life, and who made her “behind-the-ears burst out in sprouts”. It is a story about how love, and the despair that feeds on its loss, “find their own ways and tools”: this is precisely how the bones of her beloved husband come to rest behind the glass in Ona’s closet. Although mythology and nature’s primordial essence are foregrounded in the novel, it is subtly permeated by the Soviet legacy, inseparable from life in a standard apartment block, and overcast with the shadows of the present day: the pandemic and Russia’s war in Ukraine. The novel captivates us with its vivid imagery, unique metaphors, and lively, ironic, and aptly witty language.

KOTRYNA ZYLĖ is a writer, illustrator, designer, and author of seven books. She has received multiple awards for her books and is well known to readers of Lithuanian children’s literature. A distinctive feature of her creative work is her incorporation of Lithuanian folklore and mythology within modern life. “Mylimi kaulai” (Beloved Bones) is her first novel for adults.

KEYWORDS: a story of love and unique mourning; mythology and an agrarian worldview; the convergence of old and new worlds; shadows of the present; metaphorisation of Soviet legacy; everyday old wives’ tales.

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Thesis

Text as an artistic project that could simultaneously be a film script, an autobiographical novel, or an intellectual read. Text as a drawing, a spatial sketch where various spaces and images intertwine. (p. 41)

Written up over four years as his art dissertation, defended in 2017 at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, this book is Darius Žiūra's (self-) reflective and metatextual account of his creative work. An honest and genuine work of autofiction, it does not indulge in playing with self-fictionalising masks or the mystification of art and the artist; on the contrary, it questions representation, dispels illusions and exposes the trajectory of the artist's creative work in its entirety: why the author quit painting, how he came to grasp its limits, how he had a breakthrough in self-awareness and chose other artistic media, and how his most famous long-term projects "Veidai" (Faces) and "Gustoniai Gustoniuose" (Gustoniai in Gustoniai) were created. Combining personal, artistic, and historical perspectives, Žiūra recreates, in 3D, a bygone time: the behind-the-scenes of the Vilnius art world in the 1990s; shifting ideological crosswinds; unrestrained creative expression and life in Vilnius squats in the early post-independence era; working on the streets of Palanga and Paris, making on-the-spot portrait sketches of passers-by. In this book, amalgamating all of his personal experiences as an artist becomes, for Darius, yet another artistic project, a literary self-portrait (forming this book's impressive final chapter), in which, without embellishment, he questions the extent to which it is possible to remain true to oneself in creative practice, whether the laws of art have anything to do with life, and whether a completely pure self-awareness, free of ideologies, is at all possible.

DARIUS ŽIŪRA is a video artist, photographer, and painter. He is one of his generation's most prominent creators, working within the "new institutionalism" paradigm. Since 2001, he has been making trips to Gustoniai village (Pasvalys District), every three years, to document the lives of local residents; this process was made into the film "Gustoniai Gustoniuose" (Gustoniai in Gustoniai, 2020). He made a series of photo portraits of prostitutes, entitled "Veidai" (Faces), as well as works made from melted wax collected in cemeteries, and coins gathered from fountains in city parks and squares. In 2017, at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, Žiūra was awarded a Doctor of Arts degree.

KEYWORDS: artist's self-reflection; art is an illusion; changing relationship with reality; laws of art; relationships between art and life; interplay between writing and life.

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NON-FICTION



Fado. A Short History of Lithuania That Never Happened

Reflecting on fate or loss brings a sad, wistful, nostalgic feeling, for which fado itself would provide a fitting accompaniment. Especially when you imagine Lithuania's unrealised history – undoubtedly brighter than the one that actually unfolded in the middle of the 20th century. (p. 215)

Norbertas Černiauskas playfully, and with a pinch of irony, draws on existing sources as well as past visions and plans to tell us the history of Lithuania that never happened. He invites the reader to imagine what would have happened and how Lithuania would have looked if it had not been occupied by the Soviets in 1940 and later by the Nazis. If it had remained a free and independent country after the end of the Second World War. If it had been so in 1968, the year around which this book revolves. It has been chosen as the last frontier that the inter-war period's projections, plans, and ideas for the future still reached. In an alternative version of Lithuanian history, the author presents this year, which is remembered in world history as one of rebellion and revolutions, through the pulse and transformations of daily and cultural life in Lithuania; the state's political processes and economic progress; and the intersecting ideas of community and individualism. These three imaginary narratives are united by a common thread: Vilnius, Lithuania's most important city, and by the parallel with Portugal, which is drawn both with the help of real historical facts (inter-war trade relations, and the visit of the Lithuanian diplomat Petras Klimas to the Portuguese President Óscar Carmona) and similarities between the two countries (a similar economic and social situation, and moderate authoritarianism).

NORBERTAS ČERNIAUSKAS is a historian and lecturer at the University of Vilnius, co-author of several research publications. Published in June 2021, his study entitled "1940. Paskutinė Lietuvos vasara" (1940. Lithuania's Last Summer) at once became a Lithuanian non-fiction best-seller and received the Book of the Year Award in the non-fiction and documentary category. It remains one of the most influential non-fiction books of the past decade.

KEYWORDS: what if; Lithuania's alternative history; history of sources, visions, and plans; imagination's rock'n'roll; symbolic play; similarities between Lithuania and Portugal; melancholic longing for the never-time.

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MARIJA DRĒMAITĒ, VILTĒ JANUŠAUSKAITĒ, NOJUS KIZNIS, MATAS ŠIUPŠINSKAS | JŪS GAUNATE BUTĄ. GYVENAMOJI ARCHITEKTŪRA LIETUVOJE 1940–1990 METAIS
Collective monograph, ed. M. Drėmaitė, Vilnius: Lapas, 2023, 325 pp.



You Got an Apartment. Residential Architecture in Lithuania 1940–1990

'You Got an Apartment' was the title of a 1960 propaganda feature made by the Lithuanian Film Studio about a blue-collar worker family moving into a new apartment. (p. 7)

Collectively written and richly illustrated, this monograph presents a research study on residential architecture in Lithuania during the period of the Soviet occupation (1940–1990). A range of topics are covered, including: Soviet architectural policy and ideas about housing standardisation; mass housing construction (in the period from 1951 to 1990, almost a million apartments were built in Lithuania, 60 per cent of which were state-owned); types of apartment buildings and the neighbourhoods they were built in; individual townhouses, and smaller houses built in collective allotment gardens. In the Soviet system, housing could not be bought from one's own private funds but was allocated in accordance with the party's administrative instructions. The researchers expose how the communists' social idea of providing free state apartments to all citizens morphed into a tool of social control and resulted in the copy-pasting of apartments within apartment blocks, and how that generated perhaps the most important dream in life for several generations – to get (not buy) an apartment, for 'when you own an apartment, you live a private life.' Through a discussion of architecture, the monograph's authors also recount a chunk of the history of everyday life in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, including family, domestic, and economic life. In other words, all that is so poignantly familiar to many: living in standard-layout apartment blocks with identical furniture and identical things. Thus, this is a story not only about architecture but also about people and their dreams.

MARIJA DRĒMAITĒ (ed.) is an architectural historian, and professor at the Faculty of History of Vilnius University. Her research focuses on 20th century architecture, urban modernisation, industrialisation, and culture. She is the author and co-author of six academic monographs and studies, co-author of several Lithuanian architecture guides, and co-editor of the series "Architektai" (Architexts).

AWARDS: shortlisted among the Five Non-Fiction Books of the Year in 2023.

KEYWORDS: what stories does residential architecture have to tell us; how does a political agenda affect the living environment; large-scale construction projects as part of a political agenda; copied-and-pasted apartments and stencilled lives; when you own an apartment, you live a private life.

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Child Ticking. A Memoir

I was playing behind the glass screen on the veranda when I heard a family friend say that I was like a charged bomb destined to explode “God knows where or when.” To me it meant that my life was not to be ordinary. (p. 48)

Aleksandra Kasuba wrote this book at the age of seventy-seven. It is a memoir of the first nine years of her life (1923–1932), roaming over the landscape of her early years, enveloped in a bright and hopeful veil of nostalgia and love. Beneath this veil lies the environment of Kasuba’s native Ginkūnai country estate and everyday life during the first independent Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940), relationships among members of the landlord family and their family stories, adventures in discovering the world and her earliest self-reflections. Describing her life in both everyday and festive moments, brimming with adventures and playful moments, Kasuba weaves a story of how, living in three different worlds (at home, at school, and in the garden or fields), a ticking child is growing up who is experiencing the surrounding environment and its phenomena as if squared and for whom imagination serves as a refuge from the real world. Recounting stories about her parents and the visitors to the estate – people of strong convictions, independent and tolerant – Kasuba recreates the stances and attitudes of the landed gentry in interwar Lithuania, attesting that social status is not about boasting about one’s privileges, but rather about the binding obligation to fulfil one’s duties. Kasuba’s childhood memories, evoking Edenic imagery, reaffirm that the greatest gift parents can give their children is trusting them, not rushing them to grow up, and giving them permission to encounter their feelings and, indeed, life, for themselves.

Lithuanian-American environmental artist, sculptor and architect, ALEKSANDRA FLEDŽINSKAITĖ-KAŠUBIENĖ (KASUBA) (1923–2019), was born on the Ginkūnai country estate and spent her first years of life in free and independent interwar Lithuania and studied at art schools in Kaunas and Vilnius in 1942–1943. In 1944, she fled to Germany but, in 1947, she settled in New York before moving to New Mexico in 2001. During her 77 years of creative practice, she produced numerous artworks in a wide range of mediums: textile, painting, watercolour, ceramic tile panels, mosaics, and relief walls. Kasuba is most renowned for her tensile fabric structure installations, the so-called spatial environments, such as stretch-fabric shelters.

KEYWORDS: idyllic landscape of the childhood years; manor as the Garden of Eden; artist’s childhood story; early self-awareness and self-reflection; network of family relationships; emotional and intellectual home environment; refuge of the imagination; narrative of nostalgia and love.

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JURGA VILĖ | MEKO SODAS. APIE JONĄ MEKĄ, ĮKVĖPIMUS IR PLAST
Comic strip book, illustrated by Miglė Anušauskaitė, Vilnius: Aukso žuvys, 2024, 165 pp.



Mekas's Garden. About Jonas Mekas, Inspirations, and Flutter

Jonas Mekas: "Cinema as a huge tree with numerous branches." (p. 69)

The backstory of this book begins in 2000 when the author Jurga Vilė, having read the book "Trys draugai" (Three Friends) by Jonas Mekas, travelled to New York, met with Jonas Mekas himself, and volunteered for a few months at the legendary Anthology Film Archives. Later, she met countless people who had been inspired by Mekas and his work at different points in their lives. Some of them are featured in this comic strip book, recounting the circumstances of their encounter with Mekas, revealing their relationship with Jonas and his art, and laying out stories about Jonas's enthusiasm and his cinematography of everyday life. All these stories, written by Jurga Vilė and drawn by Miglė Anušauskaitė, which share much even as they differ, speak of Mekas's light that he shared with other people, of his freedom and his uniquely graceful defiance of all the thou shalt and thou shalt nots. Each story is like an individual cinematic frame, always ending with the same question: "What kind of a tree would you plant for Jonas?" Each answer, however different, helps nurture Jonas Mekas's garden, wild and endless.

JURGA VILĖ – graduate in French Philology, who studied fine arts, film archiving and restoration in Paris. She has worked as a coordinator of film and theatre festivals, translated films and written for cultural publications. She lived in Spain, for some time, where she wrote about her family history, later forming the basis for her first book "Sibiro haiku" (Siberian Haiku, 2017). To date, Jurga has authored seven books. "Meko sodas" (Mekas's Garden) is her first comic strip book.

MIGLĖ ANUŠAUSKAITĖ is a comic book author, translator, and Judaica researcher. She has written and drawn comic books about historical Lithuanian figures, most famously "Dr. Kvadratas" (Dr. Square, 2017) about the semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas; she writes a column about literature, "Tekstai ne tekstai" (Texts Not Texts), in the Šiaurės Atėnai newspaper; and, on the topic of Jewish culture and history, she has written short books about Vilna Gaon, synagogue, and shtetl.

KEYWORDS: Mekas's life and work; endless tree of cinema; Mekas's garden; so-called Lithuanian mafia in New York; Mekas's enthusiasm and legacy; story comics.

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