

Biography: Author and art scholar Gundega Repše (1960) is a writer of prose, an essayist and critic. Repše has worked as an editor and contributor in various magazines and other media discussing culture and literature. Her prose has been published since 1979. Repše has published many novels, several of her works have been adapted for theatre. Gundega Repše is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union. In 2011 Repše received the Annual Latvian Literature Award for *We. Latvia. The 20th Century* novel series idea.

Synopsis: Written in the style of a diary, *The Tin Scream* centers on the world of a 1970s teenager, a world that reflects the ongoing social and psychological processes of society. At the beginning of the book, Rugetta, the protagonist, is in the 6th grade and, on a friend's recommendation, starts to keep a diary. This reveals the everyday life at an elite Soviet school, friendships and betrayals, a protest over the presence of Russians, and an admiration for Tarkovsky and world culture, including Bach and Shakespeare. There is also a realignment of ideals, hence the title of the novel: tin being a metal that is ductile and easily wrought, and the noise it makes when broken is called "the tin scream." With this novel, Repše offers readers a rich, evocatively drawn gallery of characters who have been delightfully and wittily rendered, despite the tragic circumstances of that era. The world-renowned Latvian theater director Alvis Hermanis and his theater company, the New Riga Theatre, staged a production based on motifs from the novel, and this too has enjoyed public acclaim.

Excerpt

A gleaming, motionless eye. Ultrafine red lace on marble-white. The path of clear, calm streams and brooks across a dark-blue iris streaked with lead-gray. A pale, rosy ellipse framing it all.

A glittering mirror absorbing everything. Motionless. It never closes. Its lashes don't protect it. The blinding sun burns it, dries it out, irritates it; at night it overflows with quenching tears. Forever open. Always alive.

It looks out over the Antarctic, Tierra del Fuego, the Andes mountains, Paraguay, the banks of the Tapajós river, the Brazilian Highlands, Guyana, the Antilles, the Cordillera, the Labrador Peninsula, Greenland; it makes it as far as Dakar and then hurries back through the Atlas Mountains to Bilbao, up toward Cork, the Hebrides and Faroe Islands, pauses at Galdhøpiggen, takes in a white night in Nordkapp, wanders sleeplessly through Vorkuta, the Taymyr Peninsula, tears up with exhaustion in Harbin, stops short in Jakarta, emerges from an insomniac daze in the biting winds of Mackay, finds relief in Hobart. It circles, loops, stretches contours, grasps arcs, connects horizons. At times it concentrates. Observes something.

The black, purposeful arrow of its pupil cleaves through fog, storm clouds, the clean, still sharpness of the sky, crashes, burrows into a city, an apartment, a person, a heart. It acclimates, pulls back, stays hanging overhead like a moon, a lamp, a nightmare, a guard. It slips away, never to return, or it looks away for only a day, or it keeps watch for eternity. Whatever it wants. Depending on the changes in global climate, the rhythm of earthquakes, the nature of the winds. An eternally open eye. Indifferent. Tired. Eternal. At times adopting human characteristics.

One gold-inlaid September morning, it suddenly stops on a country that resembles a tattered bowtie; it circles the warm, shallow waters of the gulf, cools off in the Baltic Sea, smiles from the summit of Gaiziņkalns (the corner of the eye crinkles just barely), hops around the hillocks of Piebalga, meditates below the cobalt horizon of Vestiena, bathes itself in oxygen in the curving bends of the Daugava River headwaters, peers into the leaf-

scattered earth of cemeteries, riffles through the history of rural territories like through a diary, frolics, casting rays of light on golden brooches, on moldy, moth-eaten shawls, knocks over oak trees, their upturned, clustered roots like crowns, chases calves into the sky, caresses the rough, crusty asphalt roads and shudders along with empty bell towers, hides among the rye, cornflowers, poppies, watches the owls, bats, sleeping princesses.

Makes slick the path that this country's people will walk.

Reserves a fraction of light for the brightness of their eyes from its boundless wealth on high.

It watches.

Rejoices soundlessly, wails soundlessly.

Always awake.

Knocks down walls, wriggles into genes.

It is silent.

It doesn't discriminate.

Riga.

A dark-blue spot on a tattered bow-tie.

It's been here once before. A modestly beautiful and biting medieval city, an eternal stage for rulers and locals, conquerors and survivors, pompous and unassuming, putrid and creative, fragrant and destructive, carnal and carnivorous, soulful and debauched. A meek, gray little thing.

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Wander over Vērmāne Park (now Kirovs Park), scatter the piles of leaves raked by school children, dive into sand boxes before the sand is made into cakes, pound a fist against the metal sheds storing seltzer water, wedge its gaze between transparencies, posters, and firewalls, fly over Antonija (now Leons Paegle) Street, somersault down Ģertrūde (now Karl Marx) Street, roll down Brīvība (now Lenin) Street, look down onto roofs and courtyards, idle in some schoolyard. Have a bit of fun. Take a break from the waterfalls of Peru, closely inspect a rusty, claw footed tub in a communal apartment, hypnotize history in the small, round head of a teenager. Look for a friend. A tiny, little eye, a counterpart—in the center of an anemone, the tear of a little boy, the heart of a home. The North Pole, South Pole, America, Africa, and Australia are wiped clean from the eye's horizon. Even Europe and the Soviet Union—spread out like a puddle of crude oil—have faded away, faded away on the finely-tattooed face of Earth. In this moment there is only Riga, an apartment, the start of the 1970s. The little pleasures of the eye. Staying for a while where it wants, when it wants. If someone notices, remind them that the world is watching. It'll bring some peace of mind—for others, it'll drive them into despair.

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After locking his office door from the inside, Trups casts a glance over the saplings in the avenue of chestnut trees, and then pulls shut the yellow curtains.

He loosens his tie.

Takes off his brown work shoes, meticulously polished by his wife.

Puts them in the wardrobe.

Takes out his black boots.

Laces them up.

Turns on the desk lamp.

Takes out a bottle of vodka from the cabinet of his lacquered desk, and takes a teacup from the file tray.

Moves the water carafe from the coffee table to the desk.

Takes an ironed, gray-checked handkerchief out of his black leather briefcase.

Glances at the white pedestal against the wall at the far corner of his office.

Thinks for a moment.

Takes two corners of the handkerchief and thoroughly shakes it out.

Covers the plaster bust of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

Stares for a moment at the colored human anatomy poster tacked to the wall of the human body and its organs.

Wonders, as usual, why he is so interested in what's inside people.

Sits down in the maroon, wool-upholstered easy chair.

Pours a shot.

Knocks it back.

Drinks from the carafe.

Runs a small, black comb through the graying curls at his nape.

Listlessly runs it through the white hair on the top of his head.

Takes note that the cleaning lady hasn't dusted the lampshade.

Unplugs the telephone.

Feels tired.

Pours a shot.

Knocks it back.

Drinks from the carafe.

Gathers himself.

From behind the wardrobe digs out an old-fashioned notebook with faux leather corners.

Places it on his knees.

Unbuckles his belt.

Remembers something.

Finds another handkerchief in his briefcase.

Places it on the arm of the chair.

Unbuttons his fly.

Slides in his right hand.

With the left, he opens the notebook.

*

It's autumn of 1971 and I've been gifted this mysteriously old-fashioned, empty journal. I've never kept a diary until now, and I don't know how to do it. But Mom thinks I should. So I could better deal with myself.

What am I supposed to tell you, when you're nothing? There's no point in trusting or lying to you. Blank pages don't have eyes; this paper doesn't even have little squares, like so many pearls, or lines like myriad horizons.

Fine, let's start from the beginning—not from the beginning of the world, which I don't know much about, but with the present. Hah, what am I saying, I don't even know what that is. Maybe I'll jot down notes instead. Like teachers do.

I'm locked inside myself. Bah, that sounds dramatic. But there is a sliver of truth in it. The only person I share my feelings with is my best friend, Alma. She's dark, shy, and quick to get offended.

And my god, how I can't stand boys! It's like I was made to hate them. At least this year. Boys are so naïve! Maybe I don't understand them. They're so awful. But then they follow us around like dogs. What do they get out of that?

It's crazy with us girls. The boys sidle up, try to win us over, but we shun them. When they turn their backs to us, we start to love them. Yes, it's a tough world. And we have to live with it. Life's so simple, so easy when you don't love someone. My life is hard. Do boys also keep diaries and cry in the quiet of the night?

No, I'll never learn how to keep a diary! But I can't erase anything; Mom made me write in pen.

*

I have never been so angry and full of hate as I am today. Of course, it's a Tuesday. The worst day. Even Diāna is snippy, acting strange, her gaze terrifying. Alma is as sad as a trampled autumn leaf. What is she thinking about?

If someone asked me in this moment what I wanted to be, I'd say a flower. That would be the best: to grow, bloom, make others happy, be fragrant and die in a green field. But I'd be a black flower.

*

There's only one word that can hurt me: "four-eyes." But no matter. For me, the light at the end of the tunnel will forever be school. The huge windows, bright classrooms, warm hallways, and the avenue of chestnut trees outside.

Ms. Krūzīte, our homeroom teacher, is incredibly sweet to me. I like her best when she curses. She is very large, calm, and droning. The seniors all call her The Jug.

The boys are pretty brazen, they sidle up to us, and that doesn't look good. I have to deal with it. It makes me awfully anxious. I don't know how to avoid any incidents. Last year our group was the "Indians." If the boys ask me to join this year, too, Sharp Arrow will say no. Though it was interesting. Our "Golden Hall" was in the newly constructed buildings, honesty and friendship until death. There was no hatred. We were a gang against injustice, against greed.

I'm still pretty small for my age. Eleven years probably isn't a great accomplishment. The great unknown hasn't yet revealed to me what I'll be in the future. But I want to be very proud.

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Today, the boys broke into the girls' locker-room and caused a ruckus. They stole my song book.

But I'm being sent to the city-wide high-jump competition. I'll have to convince Mom to buy me cleats—then I'll fly, not just jump.

The head of studies, Ms. Kutūzova (she also teaches history), was talking to us today about the collective. That it needs to be united, how we have to defend one another, fight for one another. Like in the Great Patriotic War. No one knows this, but, for example, I feel for the boys in all their fights. Even in gym class, when they're competing, I watch them and keep my fingers crossed, like for little Mario. Isn't that a kind of battle?

There are moments in class when we get along, but that idiot Viktor ruins it all. At the end of fourth grade and for the first three days of fifth grade I still liked him, but now I hate him. Even fat Ansis can't ruin things like Viktors can. But Viktors is a Russian. Opričnikovs.

*

It was a crazy day. There was a meeting. Mario was cast as Sprīdītis. I really don't like having to yell at him. I, of course, was cast as the stepmother. But who am I in real life?

Alma is autumn. Like a fragrant pile of colorful leaves wrapped in morning mist (a stupid comparison, but what am I supposed to do when I can't write?!). No, Alma is like a warm, golden maple leaf. Hopefully the kind that doesn't reveal anything to anyone. Just grows, changes from green to gold. I'm growing now, too, and will change color toward the end of my life. Alma is completely different outside school. Relaxed, confident, doesn't pretend to be uptight. When she sleeps over at my house, we tell each other our life dreams. Alma wants to be famous, so she can get overseas and see the world. And fall in love with a movie star. My plans aren't that detailed; I still haven't figured out who I am.

Diāna is like a professor she's so insanely smart. That's probably thanks to her forehead, which is high and rounded back like a peeled rutabaga. Her mother is a gynecologist. But not even Diāna knows where children come from. She gives this annoying smile and hides her high forehead behind her workbook when we're asked questions. You're still a total child, Diāna says. I love her Emperor penguin-like dignity, because I don't have a lick of it.

Ogita has the best smile in the class. She's like a newborn giraffe and lives life with enviable simplicity. Just like she does with math, which she solves—one, two—for the rest of us morons. Her father is a basketball coach.

Eva is like a soft white cloud. And somehow sheep like. Her laughter is like the bright chirping of a canary. And she laughs often, prudishly holding her hand in front of her mouth, her pinky finger bent. Since Sīpolnieks—her dad, who left the family—is a doctor, a sports doctor, Eva is often tan. He takes her out of school in the winter and they go to the Caucasus to ski. She's definitely going to grow like an edelweiss. And there'll be songs about her.

Which one of them is going to be my friend for life?

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We tattled on the boys today. For bullying the little kids and stealing their lunch money. Awful. But they beat us to it. Tattled about us skipping home economics class, and about Ogita's tram pass (which we used during home economics with the other girls to ride out to Ziedoņdārzs park to spy on people, we'd recruited one boy to regularly report to us the goings-on in the park, but in return he wanted a student tram pass. Ogita gave him hers, and on the way back the conductor caught Ogita, like she was trying to cheat the fare. We lied and said we were from a different school. Eva, the blabbermouth, told the boys, she's always trying to show off in front of them). So today, we girls acted like complete angels and pulled faces. The boys can't stand that. It gets on their nerves. Smeltere's mom says—or so Dita tells us—that men have a more sensitive nervous system than women. Smeltere's mom is beautiful like a doll—she could dance in the circus. But her boyfriend is incredibly influential and so she has to work in the Chamber of Commerce. She used to love poetry.

After class, Diāna gave me her diary to read. I never could have imagined that she could love someone. Diāna loves Gilbert Bécaud. She'd also spent pages writing about how the boys follow me around and that it's high time I check my behavior. I agree with her, though I don't know what it is I'm doing. I don't flirt. I'm honest and don't put on airs. And I wear glasses!!! But Diāna probably knows. Her mom knows everything about women. That's why Diāna wears white-knit underwear under her skirts in the winter. It goes down to her knees. I stand guard for her every morning in the coat room until she takes them off so that, god forbid, none of the boys see it. But they don't care about Diāna's underwear, they choke me and Eva, hold us up under our armpits and say they won't let us go until we say we love

Opričņikovs, Bergsons, and Mario. I never say it. I bite and scratch, which is why Diāna thinks

Gundega Repše "Alvas klieziens" [The Tin Scream]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

I want the boys to like me. I agree that I still have a lot to learn, but I can't tell a lie. Eva lies every day, the boys follow her around and twist themselves in knots like pretzels, but Diāna never says that Eva is vying for their attention or that she's a flirt.

At the end of the day, when the boys are the last to leave and go to the coat room after gym, they'll find I've sewn shut all of their coat sleeves and stuffed their boots with paper soaked in toilet water.