

Biography: Poet and playwright Māra Zālīte was born in 1952 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, where her family had been deported in 1941 by the Soviet regime. When Zālīte was four years old, her family returned to Latvia. In addition to her writing career, Zālīte has worked at the Latvian Writers’ Union, served as editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Karogs*, and headed the Latvian Copyright Agency. She has won numerous literary award, including the prestigious J. G. Herder Prize in 1993. She is an emeritus member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Her works have been translated into several languages, including German, Russian, English, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Swedish, among others.

Synopsis: *Birds of Paradise* is the sequel to the novel *Five Fingers* and is the winner of the 2019 Annual Latvian Literature Award. Its tightly woven drama and precise poetic details clearly and uncompromisingly describe 1960s Latvia – the only time and place in which ten-year-old Laura can grow, mature, and find the truth. The plot unfolds in the beginning of the 1960s when the main character, Laura, is ten years old and is forced to face all the realities of Soviet life – joining the pioneers, Communist political education, work on collective farm brigades. Laura’s thoughts are occupied not only by her readiness to fight for the Communist party’s ideals, but also by the beautiful vision of Pavlik Morozov and the secrets in the school’s attic. Her luck turns sour when she takes chewing gum to school for the first time, and also when she is forced to be on duty with Grigorijs – called the “Goliath Gorilla” behind his back – the son of Communist Party organizer Smirnovs. As Laura grows up, she comes into contact with good and bad, and with the baggage she inherited from her parents and grandparents nearly always echoing in the background with their bitter experiences in Siberia.

Excerpt

Object

- How was school? – Mīma asks, like always, and helps take off the heavy backpack.
- What’s in here, rocks? How was your day?
- Good. – Laura answers, like always.

– Could you say a little more than that? What am I supposed to get out of a single word? – Mīma isn't satisfied.

– Aivars almost choked me to death! – Laura adds happily. She actually had a really great day.

But what had been so great about it?

– All the teachers were sick. With the flu.

Ah. Then it really had been a great day. Mīma is happy. She's made soup with dried apples and dumplings.

Laura has to finish her homework. She has to *finish* it. It's odd. No one else has to *finish* work, they just *do* it. Mīma doesn't have to finish carrying water in from the well. Mīma doesn't have to finish lighting the stove. Mīma doesn't have to finish making the soup. No one else has to finish homework. Except for Laura! To finish—it sounds far more important than just *doing*.

– Mīma, when are you going to make cranberry moss again?

– Cranberry what? I don't know what that is.

– Yes you do. We had it Sunday.

– Sunday? You mean cranberry mousse?

– Yes, cranberry mousse.

– Good thing you brought it up. I was just thinking that we should have something for dessert. You're papa will be home tonight.

– Really? – Laura pushes her chair back and jumps around with joy. – Yay! Yay! Papa! Papa!

– Oh my cranberry mousse! – Mīma sighs.

If only Papa would come home sooner! That arithmetic homework. Laura breezes through everything else at school, but not arithmetic. Those word problems. There are seven tables in the cafeteria. Each table has four chairs. A group of seven students from one class comes in and sits down. How many empty chairs are left? Laura can't figure it out. What if they all sit down at one table? What if they push all the tables together? Then there's one, big, communal table. And what does it mean that all seven students are from one class? Why exactly seven of them? Like the seven dwarves, seven goats, seven days in a week. There has to be some meaning to it all. A trap. Laura's thoughts dart around like bats in a cave. Her throat hurts.

– Mīma!

– What now.

– What's an "object?"

– An object? The table, for example. Or your ruler. There are objects all around.

Objects everywhere. Dishes. Slippers.

– Slippers! That can't be right.

– How so?

– The Communist Party object. What's that?

– *Objective*. Mercy!

– What kind of object is that? – Laura presses Mīma.

– Do your homework and stop talking nonsense!

– Mīma!

– I have to check if that dough is finally going to rise or not, if I'll be able to bake any

pīrāgi tonight.

Mīma is cross. Another bad batch of yeast. She’s also a little embarrassed; Laura can sense it. Maybe she shouldn’t have asked those questions. Maybe Mīma is embarrassed to admit that she doesn’t know what the Communist Party *objective* is. Maybe the adults don’t know, either. It makes Laura sad that Mīma is embarrassed by that. She could have just said she didn’t know, and that’s that. But Laura wants to know. Laura needs to know what she’s fighting for.

The entire class was inducted into the Pioneers on the October holiday. They had to wear white blouses. White dress-shirts for the boys. Everyone got a red handkerchief tied around their necks. Then Laura had to recite the Pioneer Oath.

– I, Laura, joining the ranks of the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization, in the presence of my comrades solemnly promise: to passionately love and cherish my Motherland, to live as the great Lenin bade us to, as the Communist Party teaches us to, as require the laws of the Pioneers of the Soviet Union.

That’s what she recited. She didn’t make a single mistake. All the kids recited it. Ludis was the only one who tripped up, three times, but the Pioneer leader helped him. The Pioneer leader even asked each one of them individually in a stern voice:

– Are you prepared to fight for the Communist Party’s objective?

– Always ready!

That’s what they had to answer.

The Pioneer leader asked, and the children replied. They had to bend their arms at the elbow and raise their hands over their foreheads to salute, as if they were shielding their eyes from the sun. The leader asked Laura, too—are you prepared to fight for the Communist Party’s objective?—and Laura replied—Always ready! At times like those there’s

Māra Zālīte "Paradīzes putni" [Birds of Paradise]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

no thinking about whether or not you really are ready. Everyone is waiting for your answer.

But Laura isn't entirely content about it all.

How many chairs are left empty in the cafeteria? Seven tables, exactly seven.