

Biography: Kristīne Ulberga (1979) is a Latvian author of novels for youth and adults. She studied theology at the University of Latvia. Her inspiration to write for young people came as a challenge to create novels that would encourage young people to read contemporary literature. Her works have been awarded Jānis Baltvilks Prize, Raimonds Gerkena Prize and the Annual Latvian Literature Award. Ulberga has also published several short stories in Latvian literary magazines, newspapers, and anthologies.

Synopsis: The Green Crow is a novel that explores the relationship between a human being and a bird, and is based on the assumption that such a bird, symbolizing profoundly experienced, true freedom, lives within us all. The green crow – a rare, conceited, boisterous creature – is that of the novel's protagonist. She first meets the bird early in her childhood when the Green Crow emerges from her imaginary forest, a place to which the protagonist habitually runs to hide from the daily hurt and injustices she suffers, where she finds consolation in the tree house she has made herself. Searching for shelter and solace, she befriends the Green Crow. The main character's family is very well-off and she wants for nothing. However, one day she finds herself in a psychiatric clinic following a spate of peculiar behavior, culminating in her telling her family about the Green Crow. The novel has two plotlines. One follows the protagonist's adventures with the Green Crow, the other her search for some meaning to her life along the corridors of a mental institution, following her realization that family life has failed to confirm that life is beautiful and that anything more is needed.

Excerpt

Learn to love the one who eats your porridge

We move very slowly, for fear that I might break or suddenly come to a stop – as it usually happens with wind-up dolls. The slower you go, the longer the road ahead.

The sun shines through the windows whose bars split the sun, slice it up as if with a knife into pieces of light and shadow. At the end of the hallway there are no windows, just a wall and shadow, and a big plastic tree. In the mornings when the sun shines, as I walk I step only on the sunny spots, and if a strip of wall happens in between the windows, I jump over its shadow. No one reprimands me nor questions what I'm doing.

"We'll miss soup. And, you know, when you do that you look totally crazy."

"Go on. Save me a place in line."

"Alright..."

F22 runs ahead. She's always starving. It's incredible that two bowls of soup, three helpings of the main course and on top of that a fruit compote so thin that it could be poured into a tea kettle and boiled like water for coffee – that all this can fit into such a small woman. She also wolfs down my, Snow White's and Clown's morning porridge.

I walk over to the plastic tree and return stepping on the cut out squares of sunlight. Years are only numbers, a prison – the room, the hospital – the hallway with sunny squares. Numbers. A room. Squares. And life.

The doctor's office is in another hallway. There are no windows there, only doors like tall people pressed against the walls. I shouldn't have to go there. There's a cold shadow on the floor, no place to put my feet.

"Please sit!" – The doctor pokes at a plate with his fork. "Tell me why you're here."

"You must understand that my life has been very hard..." I say and bury my face in my hands, but tears don't come.

The doctor sighs and pushes the half-eaten plate aside.

"In your medical history it's written that you suffer from hallucinations."

"Yes, that life..."

On the desk, only God knows from where, a blank page and a pen have appeared.

"Write."

Puzzled, I stare at the doctor.

"Write about your life and it would be desirable to start from the very beginning."

I grab the pen and I begin.

I'm six-years old. Mom is forty-one, dad thirty-five, the building is sixty-nine, and the woman neighbour with whom we share a WC in the stairwell – she's seventy-five. In the kitchen ticks a clock, from which father has removed the glass so that I can touch the hands, push them forward and back and so learn to tell time. "Why do we need a clock?" – I ask my father. "So we can get to work on time," he replies. "Why get to work on time?" – I don't understand. – "To earn money," he explains. "Why do we need money?" – I persist. "Now you're asking for the sake of asking." – Father leaves the room and vanishes like a bird of passage, who always disappears and always returns, having flown its survival circle.

I sit in front of a turned-off TV and look at a film about a forest. This I do every morning after my parents have gone to work and the neighbour has left me a handful of stuck together peppermint candies on the table. My film always starts with a tingling in the pit of my stomach, as if the viewing of a film about the forest was prohibited. In my forest there's no gamekeeper and no irritable witches in a lousy mood, there are only trees and animals and bilberries, and mushrooms. There are no red ants, mad foxes or a maze of trails, in which

one can get lost. My film starts with me, standing at the edge of the forest and looking at a house far from the city's grey throng. I'm wearing polka dot rubber boots and a blue raincoat. Mom says that the raincoat is too small, but in my forest I can even wear father's plaid shirt or mama's black brassiere, because there they'll never find me for they're at work.

But mainly I'm building a house in the forest. That's a secret. I began a week ago. My father said that you need a lot of materials for a house – wood boards, bricks, cement, electricity, water. My dad is too serious. He would never believe that I'm shoring up my house with branches, covering the roof with pine needles, but I don't need windows, because windows make sense only when they look down from the fifth floor. When the house is ready, I'll strip a birch of its bark, to make a bast-basket, in which to put bilberries I've picked for supper. All sorts of animals will come to my house and I'll treat them to the bilberries and then we'll fall asleep keeping each other warm.

The door chain jangles, and I run home, stumbling over toad humps, molehills and puddle depths.

"Why are you sitting in front of a turned-off TV?" – Mother has stormed into the room as fragrant as a city flower, her grey hair combed up into an attractive bun. She's out of breath.

"Mom, how do I make a clay mug?" – I ask, because my house lacks mugs, with which to scoop up forest spring water.

"Only you would think of something like that? Do we not have enough dishes?" – she sits down beside me on the bed and places a hand on my shoulder. "I want to introduce you to

someone, but don't tell dad, agreed?" – mother's voice is a tender song now, like that of all other mothers, and I no longer have the forest house in my head.

I don't get to answer before someone enters through the door. He brings with him a sweet cookie fragrance, a warm southern wind.

"This is Ziggy. We work together." – My mother looks at Ziggy and her voice is again like that of a real mother, tender and quiet.

"Is he a man?" I ask. I feel like laughing at the grey, slight Ziggy, who isn't at all like my father. Ziggy's hand is like a teaspoon but my father's hands are like soup ladles. Ziggy's hair is thick and curly, but the top of my dad's head is shiny. Ziggy smells of cookies and a southern wind, but father's smell comes from the north. Ziggy stands calmly in the doorway, but dad would have long ago tramped through the house with muddy boots, loudly cursing the sultry weather. No, Ziggy is not a man. I calm down.

"Yes, Ziggy is a man, he has his own car." Mother pushes me into my bedroom, for me to get changed quickly.

We're driving. Mother is silent for almost all of the drive. Ziggy's hand rests in mother's lap. Every now and then they look at each other and smile. It's the first time my mother is wearing a blue dress, which some relatives from abroad had brought her. Today mother doesn't yell. Maybe I'll reveal my secret to her this evening. I know what will happen: she'll hug me, kiss me on my forehead and say that she wants very much to visit me in my forest house. She'll ask if I need some things for my household, she'll help carry the heavy fir branches, which I myself couldn't lift up to the roof, she'll teach me how to light a bonfire and we'll sit and drink juniper tea.

With each gust of southern wind I like Ziggy more and more. We walk along a strange seaside – there are gigantic rocks like bewitched people who've been punished for their evil deeds, but the pines and the sand dune edges have humbly fallen to their knees in front of the sea so that it won't yearn for an amber necklace. I jump from rock to rock, and every now and then fall, but Ziggy's small hands always help me up. Mother doesn't get mad. She smiles.

On the way home we stop at a café. Ziggy buys us everything we want, and I for the first time in my life eat candyfloss, which has the aroma of a southern wind and cookies.

"Just don't tell dad!" – Mother is changing in her room and she turns toward me bare-breasted shaking a finger. She takes off black lace panties, carefully folds them and puts them away in the cupboard. Usually mom's panties are grey with moth-eaten holes. For sure Ziggy is not a man.

Mother turns on the TV and that means that I have to disappear and go to my room. I close the door and climb up on the windowsill. My pockets are full of bewitched tiny people who have done evil deeds. Some with a hole in their chest, others with a snail shell ingrown in their heads. I organize them according to size, so that on the day when they become human again, they'll line up prettily and listen to my story about the world.

"It's) dreadfully hot. Open the window, for God's sake!" – Father storms into the room like a cold north wind. He tracks mud all over the floor and hands me a lemon ice cream.

"Dad, look at the tiny people who have come home with me from the sea" – I huddle in the corner on the windowsill so that dad can look at my stones.

"Were you at the seashore?"

"Yes, mom and me and Ziggy..."

Father in stony silence stares at my row of evil little people.

"Good for you, now isn't that dandy that you were at the seaside with Ziggy..." he mumbles and with big, fast, northern-wind steps disappears from the room. Then a loud crash sounds, as if the neighbour gypsy had fallen through the floor into my parents' room. I run to relish the scene, because I've never liked the gypsy, but there's no gypsy there – mom is sprawled on the floor crying. Father is looking at her but doesn't help her get up, it looks to me that he's trembling, and his big hands have been drawn into fists.

"Whore!" He spits on mom's stomach and leaves the room.

"Get lost!" Mom looks at me and it seems to me that she's a being of stone who by heart's warmth has been turned back into a human, but her eyes remain bewitched – cold stone eyes.

"Mommy, I'll tell you my secret, want to hear it?" I back up to the doorstep, as if my little forest hut were right there behind my back.

"Get lost, don't you understand?" Mother looks tired. "We had a long and exciting day."

In my room father is lying on the floor. He's clutching a bottle, from which he now and then takes a swig and then grimaces.

"Did you like Ziggy?"

"Yes, we walked along the sea and then ate candyfloss!"

"Fuck..." Father's head hits the floor.

My evil tiny people haven't yet come alive, even though the gold of the setting sun is rubbing their stone backs, warming them, calling them to life.

I won't look as father drunk sleeps and mother curled up cries, better I'll prepare mom's favourite food, and then the two of us will head out to my forest hut, to sleep in the warmth of forest animals, and drink juniper tea! And I busy myself – I pour milk into a pot, add a pinch of salt and a knife's end of sugar, and wait until the milk sends up bubbles, like cats humping their back or like a person releasing homing pigeons. Slowly, like sifting sand, I pour manna into the milk, until it congeals like drops of blood. My mother's favourite food. I put the pot out on the windowsill, close my eyes and run to my forest hut. I have to tidy and fix everything up, so that my mother won't say that she won't sleep here, because the wind is sailing through the hut and rain squeezes through the cracks. I find branches to light a bonfire, lay down fir branches as cushion to sit on and I pick some wild night violets so my hut will be fragrant, then run, hurry back before the porridge has cooled off. I grab the pot, bowls and spoons – and rush to my mother's room. She's no longer lying on the floor with dried tears in her smile lines – she's sitting gazing into a small mirror. Mirror, mirror please do tell me – where is the very best place? My forest hut, I want to scream, but my mother turns, and I see her cold stone human eyes.

"What do you want now?"

"I brought supper, manna porridge."

Mother stands up and comes toward me. She'll hug me and kiss me, like all moms do, we'll eat the porridge and I'll pull out the bilberry jam hidden under my sweater...

"What's in there?" She takes the pot from my hands.

"Mom, porridge, that you like the most."

My mother smiles and turns the pot upside down. The porridge as if glued sticks to the bottom of the pot.

"Bring me something to cut it out, or better still – throw it in the garbage!"

All my body fluids race upward and flow through my eyes but my feet are glued to the brown linoleum, just as the porridge is to the bottom of the pot.

"Why do you stand there? Go!"

I run to the kitchen, all dried up Even in my evil stone people there's more life now. My father is snoring in my room. The clock without a glass ticks along. I poke my index finger at the black dial and I push the hour hand. The minute hand doesn't move even an inch. So that's how kings feel who reign over their own lives! I push the hour hand around a full circle, until both clock hands meet so they can continue their return trip together, then I take the clock and throw it out of the window. A quiet bang sounds, briefly a bell tinkles, and that's all – there's no more time.

"Achoo, achoo, achoo" someone sneezes in the cold pantry. I close my eyes and believe only in my hut deep in the forest, to which no trodden path leads and where no mother has set foot, even though it's all tidied up and the bloom of a night violet perfumes the air. It's cold outside and I want the wild beasts to warm me, I would curl up between their warm claws.

"Achoo, achoo, achoo," someone again sneezes, maybe my father has come for a drink of water or my mother, to eat her beloved manna porridge! I once more run out of my forest, out towards the city, along an invisible path forged with metal so it won't wear out and will last as long as possible.

"Who's there?" I press my ear to the pantry door.

"Who do you think?" a strange voice answers.

"I really don't know."

"Then let me out so we can get acquainted!"

My father keeps telling me that all people I don't know are bad and suspicious. All the black cars take children far away forever and the candies that strange people give you are poisoned.

"If you give me candies, I won't take them!" I hiss these words through the keyhole.

"I won't even think of it!"

"Fine, then. Do you have a black car?"

"What foolishness! What idiot would use a black car when he has wings?" The voice sounds familiar although also false and hoarse.

"Let me out, I want to have a smoke! Here it's too narrow and cold..."

So, a grown-up. Maybe the southern wind has hidden there?

"Are you Ziggy?"

"Stupid child! Does your Ziggy have wings?"

"No..."

"And these?"

I start to scream and recoil. My leg is covered with a bluish green membrane – light as the devil himself, warm and soft.

"That's my right wing!" The voice says while I continue to stare at the warm membrane. It suddenly seems to me that I could stay like this forever. But it would be good if someone would warm up my other leg.

"You like it, yes?"

"Very much."

Heat rises to my head. Through a crack in the door slowly sneaks out a grey cloud, it smells of cigarette smoke. My fingers reach out for the pantry door handle.

"Mom could come in." My hand freezes.

"Your mom, girl, is sleeping and dreaming about Ziggy. Now she's at the seaside without you. Later she'll go to the café without you. Afterward she'll head for a movie without you and at the end of the dream they'll kill you. This too, without you."

"How do you know all this?"

"And don't run to your forest. Better not."

"Why? How do you know about my forest?"

Through my stomach a hot arrow shoots upward, brawling and painfully piercing my guts.

My forest! It's just mine! Mine? Damn it!

"Fine, go and look..."

I shrink into a corner and close my eyes. Tight, oh so tight. The air around me grows cold, and I – light. The earth under my feet is my left palm with the loops of betrayal and criss-crossed lines of fate, life, marriage and death. All the roads lead to my forest hut. All the marathon runners and children will one day return home, where footprints never get overgrown with lichen even after one hundred years.

The air beside my forest this evening is not sweet as it has been other times. Overhead a grey, heavy cloud. It's starting to get dark. Underfoot branches snap – unusually quietly, like

cookies from a bakery on Lenin Street. The earth has a memory, and it tells me: "I'll never burn, because I am earth. But you ... You, too can choose who you are girl"

But this time I don't want to see my hut. Better to just hear and forget forever, because I know – my hut has burned down together with the forest honeysuckle and crown vetch. I turn back.

"My forest has burned down."

"I did tell you..."

"How did you know? Who are you?"

Silence from the cold pantry, but I wait.

"I am the Green Crow, who survived your forest on fire. The rest burned..."

Sobs sneak in among the words; they grab my hand and open the pantry's door. Reeking of stale cigarette smoke, a sea-green bird almost the size of my father tumbles into the kitchen. The bird's beak is as yellow as a bus seat, its eyes blue, beautiful.

"Hello!" The Crow extends her wing to me. It's incredibly soft. I clasp it and don't want to let it go.

"Hello ...ahem...I don't really want to talk much because my forest has burned down..." I say and evade the crow's eyes.

"Never mind. Maybe you have something for me to eat? For example, manna porridge?"

"Yes, please!" I push the pot with the manna I made for mom toward the crow.

The crow shoves her beak into the pot and makes loud smacking noises.

"I've never in my life eaten a better porridge. Crow's solemn word!"

My fingers have grown tired and I hand back the page to the doctor.

"That's enough for today."

Not so crazy

There are four of us. F22, Clown, Snow White and I – Green Crow. Peace and harmony reign in our ward. And maybe also love. In any case, we, whiling away time in our beds don't cause pain for our families, and at the same time we don't worry about what's happening in our country, because there's no television or daily newspaper in our ward or in the total unit. Only the iron beds, acrylic paint colours on the walls and the Snickers bars on F22's night table remind us of the era we're living in. Outside the window one and the same view can be seen – two trees with real leaves and a brick wall. The first day Clown had a fight with F22 because of the view, for F22 said that it was projected, an illusion, but Clown stood her ground – the lindens and the brick wall, according to her, were real. To settle the argument, they wandered about in the hospital yard and searched for the view. They didn't find it.

"I was right!" F22 exulted.

"Yes..." Clown quietly agreed, but on the evening of that very same day she had figured it out. See here: "We can assume that the whole world is one great illusion only because from various viewpoints things look different. Things and people. But the moment when we look through the window is real. We're both right!"

Clown had graduated from the faculty of philosophy, because there her ugliness, as she herself calls it, was 'secondary'. When man contemplates the world's most significant idea

constructs, he doesn't have time to pay attention to an ugly person sitting beside him picking her nose. That's what our Clown is like. An ugly girl of whom the world should be ashamed, and for whom God should apologize. She's small, fat with a hook nose, hunched shoulders, squinting eyes like a sniper in the war for the Fatherland and sparse teeth. Besides, she doesn't have a santime to her name. What place could a person like that take in this world?

"I was hoping that here, in the this loony bin – I would be fed some I-don't-care medication. And I wouldn't care that I'm such a cripple – I wouldn't need a family, and would walk with my head held high!" Clown explains: "I pretended to commit suicide. Then they collected me and brought me here."

We named her Clown and told her that she was the ugliest woman we had ever seen in our lives. Clown didn't get insulted, she knew it all along. She's just waiting for that medication. They say that the hearts of ugly people are like diamonds the size of eggs but it seems like even in this our Clown has failed. The only hope is in that medication.

It's worse with F22. She's not alone. She has a voice that instructs her about everything. For example, F22 goes into a store and wants to buy a bread roll with raisins. If the voice is sleeping at that moment, everything is fine – F22 eats the roll and leaves the store, but if the voice speaks up when F22 is choosing the bread roll, F22 spends several hours walking around in the supermarket searching for a roll with kosher meat. If F22 can't find such a roll, the voice begins to yell and cuss, and in all sorts of ways makes F22 feel small. And that of course lowers a woman's self-esteem.

There's something else too. F22's voice possesses various criminally punishable whims. For example, she has a habit of trying to encourage F22 to break off the car mirror of a neighbour's Mercedes or to tell a child's teacher that he looks like an old paedophile.

"My voice tells me the truth," swears F22, "Only other people don't like the truth."

The third in our ward is Snow White. She's a pensioner, around seventy years of age. Very calm and quiet, because she sleeps all the time, tied to her bed. When the princes come, the nurses wake her up and untie her, then the old woman shakes a fist at us, if we dare to say half a word. Clown thinks that the old woman was locked up in the attic of some rich mansion.

"Like Jane Eyre – have you read the book?" But now she's fed sleeping pills and for safety tied to her bed, but to her rich, good-hearted son, who comes almost every day, they say that his mother is slowly getting better.

F22's voice is convinced that Snow White is our psychiatrist's mother, the mere sight of whom he can't bear, because his mother can't stand any of his women. That's why the doctor has placed his mother in his clinic, so that his women can make pancakes any way they please, raise children as they like and in general – live as they like.

"And you? What's your problem?" F22 and Clown asked me, the first time I stepped over the threshold into the ward.

"I made friends with the Green Crow."

They both looked at each other and began to back off towards the window, through which can be seen the illusion.

"I could explain..."

"Or, better – call!"

"No, the Crow has disappeared."

"Fine, then tell us, because we need to know, how to treat you!"

I sat down on my bed beside the illusion and began from the beginning with the manna porridge, the same as I had written down for the doctor.

"You're totally sane!" having heard my story, announced F22, "There's nothing sick in that, understand! Every child has playmates."

"Yes, yes," said Clown, "I too had a friend when I was a child. My parents didn't believe it though. "Such an ugly child can't have any friends," my mother once told my father, thinking that I was in my room. My friend was very sly, he never showed himself to my parents. I invited him to birthdays, Christmases, New Years, but he never came, and my parents decided that what you can't see doesn't exist. When I enrolled in the philosophy faculty, my friend suddenly died. And to this day my parents don't believe that I've had a friend. Do you know how painful that is?" Clown pressed her face in the pillow and for a while sobbed.

"It's ludicrous that because of childhood errors a person can end up in a loony bin," my voice says.

"The Green Crow hasn't died and it's not a child's fantasy..." I said that very loudly, so Clown would also hear it through her sobs.

Clown and F22 moved to sit closer together and almost in unison said:

"Tell us!"