

Biography: Māris Bērziņš (1962) is a writer and playwright. Māris Bērziņš has worked in the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia, he established and for a while managed the State Culture Capital Foundation. After this colourful career Māris Bērziņš decided to turn to literature and currently works as a full time writer. Māris Bērziņš is an active member of the Latvian Writers' Union.

Synopsis: This novel is mostly about the bureaucracy that spreads, disease-like, throughout the whole country, including pre-school education establishments. Even the Latvian Ministry of Economics admits that the high levels of bureaucracy are responsible for the nation's low level of competitiveness. What is bureaucracy all about? It's mostly about a lack of trust, justified by the need to exert control, about the feeling of guilt so characteristic of Latvians, which they often describe as a sense of responsibility and a desire for self-improvement. It's about fear, often defined as cautiousness but which basically is simply fear. It's a story about the desire of one group of people to fit life into a specific legal framework while another group wishes to live freely and creatively. And it's about the balance required between these two wishes. In many aspects, this novel is about balance. One character in the book falls into a coma, losing his physical balance, while another fails to keep her psychological balance and ends up in a psychiatric hospital.

Excerpt

Somewhere at the other end of the house, the phone starts ringing. Linda Cibāne, an MP for the Republic of Latvia's *Saeima*, pricks up her ears. Letting her magazine slip to the floor, she dashes downstairs to take the call. She races through the living room, head up and looking towards the kitchen area, once again forgetting the obstacle blocking her path – the sudden bang to her side almost throws her off her feet.

The pain is so unbearable that at first she thinks she has broken her hip. Luckily, it is not too serious, merely some damage to her fleshy tissue. 'Bloody box!' she groans loudly. 'Bloody relic, why on earth should I put up with you? I didn't take a day off work to put up with this.' From experience, Linda knows that the pain will soon subside but that she will have a bruise on her thigh for a week at least. She might have borne it if it were for a Steinway, but this... She would never run into a black grand piano as she did this brown one, its inconsequential appearance rendering it practically invisible.

Linda's pulls a face as if wracked with sobs yet doesn't manage to squeeze out any actual tears. Her irritation is compounded by the memory of her husband promising to move the piano somewhere else. She doesn't care where – the basement, the garage, out of the house, the country cottage, to her mother-in-law's if necessary. He could put it wherever he wanted – she was fed up of the thing. Linda imagines looping one of the piano strings around Indulis' neck and, kneeling him in the groin, shoving him against the wall. Her husband then rolls his eyes in fear, willing to obey her every command. 'Today, my dear, I'm going to tear you apart.' Linda swings her leg back, ready to kick the instrument, but then decides against it. No, hurting her toes like that would be a waste of physical and emotional energy. The piano itself couldn't care less if it were burnt or broken. Reason should always come first. Most importantly, she needs to calm down. Rubbing her hip, Linda limps to the phone.

Drinking her morning coffee, Linda has a sudden insight – even one piano is one too many in this house. Far too many.

Linda is browsing online, trying to get an idea of how much a 'Riga' piano might be worth. On one of the free ad sites, there are some on sale for forty, fifty, even a hundred euros. Others are giving them away for nothing, provided the new owner collects. Good

God! And here we are with one right in the middle of the room, on top of which it doesn't even go with the rest of the furniture. How odd that Indulis, for all his training in art, was totally lacking in any sense of harmony. The arguments they had had on the matter! But no, in Indulis' view, that was exactly the right position for the piano; right in the very middle of the room and providing a charming counterpoint to its surroundings. What was wrong with him, couldn't he see? It was quite beyond her.

Linda frowns, preoccupied, her teeth gently biting her lower lip. Indulis may have a bee in his bonnet but he is a good father and able to perform all manner of domestic chores. He is trying to maintain the same standards in other areas of life, too, as far as possible. He is aging, starting to get aches here and there. And another thing, he's become very reluctant to socialize. She has to find other people to go with her to events, opera premiers and the ice hockey. And as for sex – that happens increasingly infrequently, lasts less and less. She didn't like thinking along these lines when it came to her husband but, if she had to be honest with herself, their future together didn't look all that bright. Maybe there will come a time when it would be better to get a divorce? Should she already start looking for someone else to fill his shoes? Well, not quite yet ... she had to make plans, she had to improve her quality of her life but it had to happen naturally, without additional pushes or nudges. It wasn't that it was unbearable, they led quite a decent life, one might say, even a good one. No one forced me to marry an older man, I wanted to ... No, no need to plan a divorce just yet, it's just a hypothetical future option.

Around midday, Linda is blessed with a splendid idea – the piano, which for years has done nothing but gather dust and serve literally as a stumbling stone, should be given to Kārlītis' nursery, the institute of pre-school education named "Flower Window". Linda recalls how, after the Christmas concert, the music teacher complained about the very poor

condition of their piano, said to be very dilapidated. It was embarrassing trying to teach children with such an off-key instrument. There were no funds for its extensive repair, truly a disgrace and such a terrible shame. Yes ... whereas we have a piano in perfect working order. It may only be a basic 'Riga' piano but it was well-maintained and looked after; an instrument of quality. Let the children have it. That will please everyone.

Talking them round

Hearing Alma, the 'Flower Window' nursery's long-serving head teacher, inviting her to replace Sabine as educational methodologist, nursery teacher Gunita wants nothing more than to simply leave the room.

'Me? Why me? What about Monta? She has always wanted that role, hasn't she?'

Gunita's hand grabs the door handle. 'I said ages ago that I neither need nor want the position.'

'Please, don't run away like that. Monta has just given in her notice, right out of the blue. You do see, don't you?' Sabine, the methodologist, starts to feel uneasy. 'Not a nice move on her part but what can we do Another solution must be found and, take my word for it, you're the only one who has any chance of pulling it off.'

'Stop it!' Gunita winces. 'I don't want to be a solution. The world is full of wonderful people. You'll have to announce a state competition for the post anyhow, you might find a star candidate applies.'

'Guna dear, why are you being so naïve?' Alma asks. 'If you were me, would you risk taking on someone we don't know? We've experienced that before, you know that well enough. Someone new coming in, no one would be happy about it... and there would be no

way of getting rid of her, either.’ Alma stares Gunita directly in the eye. ‘You and Sabine are my best girls. You both started as teachers and I would be so pleased if the two of you took up the reins when I leave. You would be the youngest, most progressive management team in the region.’

Alma gives Sabine and Gunita a genuinely warm look. The two of them are equally beautiful. Yes, she could leave the nursery in their hands when she retires with complete peace of mind. Although Sabine possibly doesn’t share her conviction wholeheartedly, maybe preferring a calmer sort of person than Gunita at her side, they are well matched and will make a good team. No doubt about it, Sabine should be the head teacher with the rather more fiery Gunita as her deputy for educational methodology. I must see it all settled while I’m still here, while Sabine still listens to me.

‘To my mind, no one can really be referred to as young after the age of thirty-five but thanks for the compliment, boss. And for putting your trust in me.’ Gunita presses her hands together and bows like a Japanese person. ‘But there are a number of issues I’m not at all happy about.’

‘Which are, exactly?’

‘As methodologist, I will have a lot of paperwork to oversee, something I can’t abide and that will also mean that the children themselves will be the last thing on my mind.’

‘How do you think I managed?’ Sabine pouts. ‘It’s not that big a deal, you just have to keep up with all the regulations and circulars, Department decrees and so on ... As you can see, I’m still alive.’

‘You are, but just staying alive isn’t good enough for me. Quite frankly, I only have time for the paper in books and for the toilet, and a soft one at that.’ Gunita folds her arms over her chest.

‘Girls, please don’t argue!’ Alma smiles at one, then at the other. ‘My dear Guna, why must everything be so black and white with you? It’s really not on to speak like that, especially as Sabine has been dealing with it all this time ... We should all take our hats off to Sabine for what she has done. You are well aware of the importance of paperwork. You’re a great teacher but you’ve developed professionally to such an extent that it’s time for you to take on more responsibility for teaching methods across the whole nursery, not just your unit. You do have a master’s degree, after all, not to mention all the courses and seminars you’ve attended. I can’t help wondering why you did all that – you certainly don’t need all those qualifications to teach one unit ...’

‘You’re really twisting my arm now, Head.’

‘Of course I am! How else can I get you to agree? I would like to remind you that you’ve often expressed all kinds of interesting ideas on educational matters, why not bring them to a wider audience? Like that village method of yours you told us about recently? You sounded like a real methodologist.’

Gunita tries to picture the run of events, ranging from the past and stretching into the future. She had aired many ideas in front of her co-workers, but had any of them been listening? They might have nodded here and there – yes, of course they had, but then they had just turned back to their work. Would that change at all if she were to accept this position of authority? Would she be able to do more?

‘I’m not sure which method you’re referring to. You’re always misinterpreting what I say. I only mentioned a village as a way of exploring the world, of general development. A village where children grow and develop in a natural setting along with adults of all ages and professions. The key word in all that was natural, not village. See it as you please but a nursery is nothing more than an artificial construct devised for the comfort of adults.’

'Is that so?' Alma laughs.

It was widely known that Gunita often seemed to have her head in the clouds, her discourse sometimes incomprehensible or easily misinterpreted. However, her love of idealistic imagery did nothing to detract from her work performance that was always professional and at times outstanding. A clear testament to this was the fact that former pupils would call in to see her even when they had moved on to the first, second or even the third year of primary school. Even so, if she let her go on uninterrupted now, she would start going round in circles, on the border of absurdity.

'It almost sounds as if you're ready to dismantle the nursery entirely!' Alma says.

'For all I care you can close it down tomorrow, but that's not what I'm saying. I'm talking about professional development, about what we could do better.'

'Right. And as methodologist, you'll have a better chance of implementing change on a larger scale. Isn't that so, Sabine?'

'Well...' with Alma's eyes boring into her, Sabine falters. 'Yes, sure, I will support everything that's in the children's best interests. As to the paperwork, you can always ask me - I'll help you whenever I can.'

'Aren't you clever?' Gunita sneers. 'Trying to get me to come to a snap decision. I can't decide that quickly. Let me think it over. I'll have to see what my family has to say about that.'

'Family?' Sabine is puzzled.

'Yes, family,' Gunita snaps back.

'Have a look at this!' Alma hands her the job description for applicants for the position of methodologist. 'It doesn't say anything much but have a look all the same.'

'Fine. I will.' Gunita shoves the papers into her bag. 'We can discuss it again later.'

'I won't be here for much longer,' says Alma, looking at the calendar. 'Tomorrow, Gunita dear. To set my mind at rest. Then, the day after tomorrow, you should both attend the seminar on self-evaluation, organized by the department of education. Something new.'

Finding herself a seat on the bus, Gunita pulls out the job description for the new position and scans through it.

Duties to be undertaken in the role of methodologist in the pre-school educational establishment, "Flower Window":

1. To implement the pre-school teaching programme.
2. To ensure the correct administration of teaching processes.
3. To participate in the development plan as proposed by the educational establishment and to draw up the teaching programme.
4. To draw up and file methodological materials to ensure the correct execution of teaching processes and monitor their content and suitability.
5. To consult with teaching staff, providing them with methodological assistance.
6. To consult with parents on their children's personal development, issuing recommendations for children's upbringing within the family.
7. To organize educational excursions and other events within the framework of the teaching programme.
8. To oversee the teaching process, analyse outcomes, draw up proposals for improvement and implement their introduction.
9. To stay abreast of the latest theories in pedagogy, psychology and methodology and to coordinate their implementation in practice.
10. To file all paperwork in compliance with the regulations of the educational

establishment in question.

Gunita sighs. Are these supposed to be the Ten Commandments of a pre-school methodologist? She has no difficulty understanding what they mean but they sound so alienating, more like an instruction manual for some mechanical device. Why don't they use more everyday language, make it sound more human? Hmm, obviously they had difficulties with it.

Gunita's family is small – just Gunita, her partner Ansis and their she-cat, Karma. The pre-school teacher and the IT systems analyst aren't tied to each other in the eyes of the law as yet; it is their love alone that holds it all together. They both have the feeling that Karma loves them, too.

'I have some news,' Gunita announces as soon as she gets home.

'Give it a go! I can see you want to. You can always resign,' Ansis is economical in his appraisal.

'And what do you think?' Gunita strokes her cat. 'Purr, purr, purr?'

An altruistic proposal

At last she's going to get it done. Such a lucky coincidence – her husband usually takes little Kārlis to nursery but this morning he left before six for some remote destination on the other side of Latvia. Linda climbs behind the steering wheel and drives off feeling elated, filled with the happy anticipation of getting rid of the key-board box while also bringing joy to the nursery. Well, if not all of them, at least Aunty Sing-Song will be happy. Haha, Aunty

Sing-Song! How good children are at coming up with funny nicknames. Linda smiles at herself in the rear-view mirror.

Stuck in the traffic, her mind wanders to her husband. Hmm ... the piano had belonged to his late father, his mother had then given it to him for safekeeping, but so what? Did they really have to hang on to it for all eternity? It would be silly for them to keep it at home without ever using it. And in all honesty, Indulis isn't the only one having a say in this – the piano is in their house so it belongs to her, too. The only things hindering her plan would be distorted perceptions, imagination and emotions. Maybe she should call her mother-in-law before talking to Indulis? No, no, that wasn't a good idea; he might get in a huff again about her going above his head. She had to do things in the right order to keep things running smoothly at home.

'Could I have a quick word with the music teacher?' Linda asks Inese, class teacher for the "Bunnies" section.

'Sandra? If she's in already you can.' The teacher sticks her head out into the corridor. 'Sandra? Are you there?'

Inese's voice is tuneful and booming – it would be no surprise if all the Sandras in the vicinity replied to her call. Luckily, the right one is there. Having come out of her office, Aunty Sing-Song is already opening her mouth to tell Inese to join the ranks of the teachers' choir or a folk singing group but, catching sight of Kārlis's mum, her face takes on a more professional demeanour. You never know what to expect from parents, especially when they play an important role in the field of politics.

'Hello!' Linda gives her a broad smile and Sandra relaxes a little. 'You...you remember me, don't you?' Seeing the teacher nodding, she continues, 'Great. Now, I've had an excellent idea about that piano.'

'Yes? What piano?'

'The nursery's piano. You said that yours is really out of tune and is literally falling to pieces...'

'Did I? Maybe I did say something along those lines but it's of no matter now.'

Sandra takes off her glasses and cleans them on her handkerchief. 'It's gone now, anyhow, so no point talking about it.'

'Oh really? What happened?' Trying to look surprised, Linda is secretly rejoicing. If that's the case, they'll surely jump at having our piano.

'The frame gave way so that was that, they shifted it out. Unfortunately, that's fatal for a piano, like a person breaking his neck.'

The music teacher's voice is sad; her eyes seem to well with tears. Linda isn't particularly over-emotional as a person but finds the teacher's distress affecting and automatically offers Aunty Sing-Song her condolences, realizing too late that may have been excessive.

'Thank you for being so understanding!' Sandra looks at her gratefully. 'It was so sad losing a piano that we've had for so many years.' She would have liked to add that musical instruments were as precious as children to her, to be cared for and cherished, that we live, breathe and sing alongside them – but she restrained herself for fear of seeming over-sentimental, pathetic even.

'Ahh ...' Linda makes a sympathetic face and pauses. She suddenly remembers her anger towards the piano – she almost kicked it, another person might have stroked it lovingly.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, a moment of weakness.' Sandra waves her hand as if banishing what she had said before. 'I get a bit over-emotional at times.'

‘Not at all, it’s only natural. You can’t leave your emotions out it when it’s someone so ...I’m sorry, such a loss.’

Linda starts to feel bogged down; she wants to snap out of this maudlin conversation as soon as possible and move on to a more sensible one. The thought that the teacher feels like someone having lost a beloved pet crosses her mind. I will offer her the piano but she won’t be ready to accept it yet. No, I will have to start on a different tack.

‘I imagine you have a new one by now?’

‘I wish we did but no, we don’t. Perhaps at some point in the future ... I’m not sure. For now, I’m making do with a synthesizer. But you know yourself what *for now* means.’

‘A synthesizer, that sounds nice.’

‘Oh no, not at all, I’m afraid. A real instrument is so much more alive, you can tell by its name alone that this one is synthetic. Playing it makes my fingers sweat.’ Sandra puts her glasses back on her nose.

‘Did you know there’s an app you can download onto your phone now – it sounds just like a real piano. I’ve heard it myself.’

‘Are you serious?’ The teacher freezes.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. No, I was only joking.’ Linda changes approach in a flash. ‘I’m sorry if my humour is a little black. That wasn’t funny at all ... No, but that wasn’t the reason I stopped by. I have some good news for you.’

‘Yes?’

‘I, or rather we, have a rather good piano at home that we would like to donate to you, or should I say, the nursery. Nothing too upmarket, just a “Riga” but it is in good working order ... and it’s been said by people who play that it has a lovely tone. So, what do you say? Might it be of use to you?’

Sandra's eyes light up and her whole body stiffens. Ha, how easy it is to get someone to stop in their tracks, Linda muses.

'Oh, my God!' Sandra is suddenly animated. 'Really?'

'Of course.'

'The other one was a "Riga", too ... that would be amazing ... are you sure you don't want it yourselves?'

'No. None of us is very musical, sadly ... We inherited it from my father-in-law but ice-hockey is all my son thinks about.'

'Ah,' Sandra sighs. 'Boys are all the same.'

'Yes ...' Let them be on the same side. 'What about the piano, then? Shall I bring it in?'

'Well, of course!' The teacher is heartened. 'I'd accept it in a flash but we will have to ask the board first. Let's go and see the head teacher.'

They set off down the corridor and, giggling, Sandra tells Linda that the children call her Aunty Sing-Song. Linda doesn't let on that she already knows.

'What rascals! It sounds quite impressive though, doesn't it?' she enquires tentatively.

'Yes, I like it, too. Children are so inventive.' Sandra smiles then tries the door of the procurement office. It's locked.

'Let's go to the head's office. On Monday a new head started, but I'm sure you already know that,' the teacher says.

It's the first Linda has heard of it. No doubt it's a very bad show, not being aware of administrative changes at the top of your child's nursery. Indulis must have known, why didn't he tell her? Things like that shouldn't be overlooked.

'I only got back yesterday from a business trip - my husband hasn't had the chance to tell me about the changes as yet.'

'We're still getting used to them ourselves, although there's not much to get used to as the new head is our own Sabine. She used to be our methodologist. While Gunita, who was class teacher for the "Little Ants", is now the methodologist. Here we are, then.' 'Knock, knock, can we come in?' The music teacher opens the door.

'Yes?' The head teacher turns in her chair towards the visitors. Elita, the procurement manager, is there with her, her elbows propped on the desk as she stares at her computer screen.

'Look, Kārlītis's mum has come to see us, erm, about ...' Sandra falters. 'Kārlītis in "Little Hedgehogs" .

'Yes, I know ... Good morning!' Sabine gets up, inwardly girding herself for whatever might follow.

'Good morning!' Linda smiles. 'Congratulations on your new position!'

'Thank you!' the head teacher returns her smile. From the look of her, MP Cibāne isn't here to make a complaint.

Linda glances out of the window and, catching sight of her car, recalls she has a meeting with sub-committee members regarding the closure of the Governing Body of Priority Procurement for national economics, regional politics and the environment. Then, she quickly tells them about the piano and expectantly awaits their answer.

'We could certainly use a piano, couldn't we?' Sabine glances at Elita. 'What do you say?'

'Isn't it amazing?' Sandra interrupts.

‘Yes ... It is probably ... very good.’ The procurement manager tries to weigh up the practical issues involved in a donation in her head. ‘We’d have to draw up the deed, file a report with the Education Department and then also ... well ...’ Elita looks at Linda and Sabine. ‘On the whole, I don’t foresee any problems we couldn’t deal with.’

The notion that the donation may be some pre-election manoeuvre crosses both Sabine and Elita’s minds simultaneously. Even if it were, was it something to worry about? Not really, Elita concludes. There’s no way out of it so, for now, the most important thing is to manage everything in accordance with the law and to maintain political neutrality, Sabine reflects.

‘How are we going to actually get the piano to the nursery?’ Sandra is not interested in politics or filing reports, she needs her piano. ‘Can we move it here ourselves? It’s a bit much to be given a piano free of charge and expect it to be delivered, too.’ She looks enquiringly at Elita, who looks askance at the music teacher, pressing her lips together emphatically as if telling her to stop babbling – this was not a music class but an important administrative problem.

‘It’s a good question. If we are to spend money, namely public funds, in ways not in compliance with our budget specifications, we will ... will breach regulations and that is illegal. Can we do that? No, we can’t.’ Elita notes the look of alarm on Sabine’s face. ‘No allowance is made in our budget for unforeseen expenditure.’ At this, Linda sneers noticeably. ‘We would be only too happy to accept it if we could. But, you see, officially the piano isn’t yet ours. Everything is still very much up in the air so we can’t...’

‘But what do you mean? It has been donated to us, hasn’t it?’ Sandra looks hopefully towards Linda who nods in agreement. ‘See, it counts, then.’

'My dear, that's not sufficient. Nothing is settled until the paperwork is all in place and the piano is registered on our list of assets. We have to get all the paperwork in order first, then you can play.' Elita won't budge an inch.

'Oh, this is just dreadful!' Sandra puts her hands together, as if in prayer.

Linda is rather amused by the fuss Elita and Sandra are making yet at the same time pities them for having to worry about such trifles. No more than a silly transport issue yet the procurement manager is already frowning in anxiety. Not to mention the music teacher, who seems close to a nervous breakdown. She must be reassured while there is still time.

'Please, think nothing more of it. When making a donation, no one expects the recipients to go and collect the gift themselves. I shall see to the piano's delivery myself.' It was a pleasure to see how just one sentence immediately soothed the nursery staff, how the corners of their mouths turned upwards. 'But now I must be off. I'll let you know when I'm ready to bring it over. I should manage it in the next couple of days.'

'How kind of you! Thank you!' Sandra grabs Linda's hand and gives it a hearty squeeze.

'Even so ... ' Elita shrugs her shoulders, still trying to work out whether the donation is down to possible political gain and something would be demanded in return or if it was really just a well-meaning gesture.

'Let's wait and see!' Sabine manages to give her a smile as Linda takes her leave. She then looks at her watch. 'Oh! We are going to be late for the ministry seminar. Where is Gunita?'