

Biography: Laima Kota (Muktupāvela) (1962) is one of Latvia's most well-known and beloved authors. She gained widespread recognition with her first novel, *The Mushroom Covenant* (2002), which won the 2002 Annual Latvian Literature Award. Her range of writing extends to include her children's book, *Matilde and Teresa or How to Be Here, There and Elsewhere* (2013), and a biography entitled *BrotherBrother* (2008), which is about the brothers Imants and Gido Kokars, conductors and masters of Latvian choral music.

Synopsis: The novel revolves around a communal apartment in Riga. Once the large, upmarket homes of the wealthy, during the Soviet years, these apartments were converted and shared by several families, who were forced to use the same kitchen and bathroom and often had to keep their cooking utensils and food in their own rooms to prevent them from being stolen. The protagonists are products of the everyday reality existing at the time. They are of different nationalities, work in different fields, and have a totally different perception of life and yet, they share the same roof.

Excerpt

In Front Or Behind

"You see, here Zeus is leaning forward slightly but in your version he is lying right back, as if he were on a sofa, and he also has his chin raised up." Stretching out her hand, in it a sharply pointed pencil, Ritma Zikmane, the artist leading the drawing class, measures in the air the angle of the nose belonging to the gesso Zeus as compared to the one on the sheet

of paper. The difference was substantial. "If you could just change the angle, your Zeus will turn out great, he'll totally come alive. It's just a matter of practice, you'll be fine."

"Poor Zeus is waiting for some wine," somebody from the group said in a loud whisper.

"First, you need to construct the overall figure well – the width of the face against the length of the body, only then can you get carried away by curls of hair and eye details. The eyes are set in the middle of the head."

Whilst talking, the teacher had caught sight of another student's work. This one looked more of an argumentative sort: "It's nothing to do with me – look, he told me himself to start with the beard."

"Don't fiddle with it! You, as the artist, must have a similar heaven-sent command and perceive the surfaces, even in Zeus." Ms Zikmane sighs and moves on to the next student. "You have power over each and every line appearing on the paper. The lightest spot in the shadow should be darker than the darkest spot in the semi-shade. That's the rule. I need a well-constructed figure from you, not all these finicky details. The fun part comes later. Pass me some bread!"

Having given her his piece of white bread, the student sulked. He watched as, rolling the bread over the drawing of Zeus he had taken such pains with, she erased the beard drawn in meticulous detail as well as all the carefully drawn locks of hair and shading round the eyes. He had really gone to town on them. With the most miserable of looks on his face, the big mouth said dramatically, "Ms Zikmane, please, that was my bread for the day ...Twenty *kopeiks* worth, my whole daily allowance."

Relative silence reigned over the drawing studio on the fifth floor of the Riga School of Applied Arts. The graphite of HB pencils could be heard scratching. Tradition demanded these to be sharpened with a scalpel; the pencils had to be as sharp as needles. The room smelled of gouache paint. Rinsing the brushes, the glass jars chimed together, the water splashed. The whole floor of the roof space at number 49, Lenin Street was divided into booths by lightweight bulkheads. Within every compartment, seven or eight artists-to-be learnt to draw and paint. The natural light streamed in through vast windows. The teachers directed the lamp exclusively onto Michelangelo's gesso, or onto David's nose-eyes-ears, or a cube, or spheres, or one of the thousands of casts of Apollo or Zeus taken from the original, creating more examples of contrasting chiaroscuro.

During the lesson, the teachers didn't stay with their students the whole time. Rather, they spent their time sitting in the staff room, smoking at an open window and drinking black coffee, the aroma wafting over the entire floor. The teachers chatted freely; about everyday life and intellectual matters of the sublime as well as about where you could get hold of things, and when they did actually remember their students, usually towards the end of the second hour, they felt slightly guilty – about the coffee if nothing else. Acquiring coffee required a degree of heroism. You had to have connections, or what were known as *blats*.

The artists were always well connected. One of them had bound a beautiful guest book which someone else, despite scarcely knowing him, had given to the manager of the speciality food store so he would set aside coffee beans for them. Artists couldn't live without coffee, everybody knew that was a fact of life. The manager of the speciality food

store even envied them a little because, whatever way you looked at it, those sorts managed to stand with one leg outside of the daily socialist grind. Even if they were a little crazy. You couldn't deny them coffee, you had to give it to them. And so, in a way, the manager of the speciality food store felt a little closer to the world which, no matter how much he wished otherwise, was beyond his grasp.

"To help you understand that the painting process is also a spiritual activity, here I give you a vertical dimension as well!" The voice of the painter, Anita Jansone-Zimīte, could be heard from the adjoining compartment, along with excited exclamations from the girls, hoping they would finally be given something nice to paint. A bunch of grapes, for instance.

"To complement the green bottles, here you go, a blue one, too!"

"Oh no, more bottles ..." the girls' groans were heartfelt. "Miss, please, who on earth only wants to paint bottles?"

"Cezanne!"

The quiet, filled only by the gentle splash of brushes being rinsed and the scratching of pencils, was broken by the sound of the entrance door opening. The murmur of conversation and chitchat ceased immediately. The principal, Imants Žūriņš, along with a group of teaching staff and a short man in a suit and tie, slowly paced through the drawing studios, glancing unobtrusively at the work of the hardworking students. Margrieta thought to herself that the man next to the principal had to be pretty old - the hair at his temples was white - and he had a big nose, big ears and dark brown eyes. She listened in on their conversation. Žūriņš spoke Latvian, his style of speech not giving Margrieta the impression that he had arrived in town from some faraway rural area, from sheds full of cow smells and

furrows to be weeded, but rather from the castle of the great which, to her mind, could be found on the high mountain of Beverīna or in the Academy of Science. Each and every word came out beautifully and reverently. Margrieta blushed. Like many of her fellow female students, she felt an inexplicable awe and daughterly respect for him.

The slow procession stopped behind Margrieta. She felt embarrassed. To hide her sense of confusion, she continued sketching mechanically and shading Homer's turban. With strangers' eyes fixed on you, your hands freeze up and everything is difficult, not just drawing.

"The most important thing is that every student learns to distinguish light from shade," the principal was doing no more than explaining but Margrieta perceived his message as a treatise on alpha and omega, worthy of a philosopher. "The artist must know that semi-shades do exist, even if they can't be seen."

"Once in their lifetime, every artist must paint the sea, a self-portrait and bank notes," Ilmārs Blumbergs, smiling, proclaimed to the principal in a slow, resonant voice which compelled those around to listen in. Seeing her former teacher together with the principal, Margrieta felt even more perplexed. In Blumbergs' presence it was shameful to see things in general, as a single entity, because of your ignorance and lack of skills.

"Yours or somebody else's?"

"Latvian."

"There lies the foundation of art. Schooling. Work. Discipline. Besides, it's so pleasurable if a student devises his own artistic language." As if he hadn't heard what Blumbergs said, the principal scrutinized Margrieta's drawing with interest.

"The blind Homer personified," the guest permitted himself a cordial comment. Margrieta lowered her eyes and attacked her drawing with increased zeal. "Young lady, if you placed your drawing next to the chalk composition they could easily be confused. Interesting. Very interesting. Very, very interesting..."

"Āron Makarovič, I would like to invite you personally to attend the showing," the principal continued conversationally as he walked away from the compartment where Margrieta's group was working. Before leaving the drawing studio, the man spun round and for a short, mesmerising moment, stared at Margrieta. She blushed, pinning herself up against her easel board and almost embracing the blind Homer personified on the paper. After the show, in which the students exhibit their drawings and paintings from that semester, their individual overall output becomes self-evident. Everything you've done, lovie, collated for all to see in your portfolio. The teachers urged the gifted ones, those with art oozing from every pore, not to be lazy. Yet it was those who worked quietly, methodically and with self-discipline who achieved better results with their work. The talented ones seemed to splash their precious gifts here and there, probably talking too much, giving themselves time off to go for a drink, acting like freethinking artists and skipping classes, going off to the God's Ear Café at the Planetarium during lessons, mingling with artists and seeing only black or white in everyone around them. There was no sense of balance in their lives; if they worked, they worked from the moment of inspiration to total exhaustion and later, much later, it generally transpired that it was the undeniably gifted ones that burned out. Whereas the quiet ones, the ones who worked methodically and

laboriously, slowly scraping their art works together, look, they were the ones to have their first exhibitions soonest. Recognition could be earned through hard work.

After these shows, it was often the case that those having produced an exceptional drawing or painting could not find their work again. Stolen! Certainly, stealing was not to be encouraged and yet it was, all the same, a form of recognition which provoked white-hot envy amongst fellow students and confirmed a work as having turned out very nicely.

Climbing up to the drawing studios to reclaim her assessed work, Margrieta sighed. She saw what was left. Just a few bits and pieces. A couple of drawings of gesso heads and some studies which had probably been left there out of sympathy for those whose work had been stolen. Margrieta was hit by a wave of fury and, at the same time, a quiet sense of joy. Of course, there was a degree of satisfaction to be had in such recognition. But what was she to give her family for Christmas? Birthdays? Saint's days? A drawing in a small frame made the best gift of all. A Da Vinci-style drawing in red chalk or pastel-hued angels could be sold for as much as five roubles a piece. Now she had nothing.

"Are these drawings yours?" Margrieta heard someone say. She rose from her squatting position over her half empty portfolio. The same man who, some time ago, had walked through the drawing studios with the principal was now standing in front of her. In his hand he held a piece of her homework. A pair of angels. This meant that all her other drawings had been swiped.

"Copies. Mine. No, that's Gauguin." Margarieta gave out a sad sigh and quickly put on her sunglasses. "We were studying him in art history, so I drew them."

"Which museum did you visit to do your research? In Paris, maybe?" the man enquired with such genuine candour that Margrieta gave out a short burst of laughter. Paris, for heaven's sake? The Louvre perhaps, or the National Gallery in London?

"That's from the pictures in our textbook."

"Will you, as an artist, permit me to buy this sketch?" Margrieta was so perplexed by the man's words that she blushed.

"It's just a drawing for school, an exercise..." she stuttered. Margrieta had no nerve for bargaining, having accepted the premise swirling in the air around her which held that demanding money for art was humiliating. The gift was God-given, so how could anyone even think of selling it, in effect merchandising God. So, comrade artists, here you go – take five roubles without so much as a peep from you. Suddenly out of nowhere, a certain modesty imposed through her education rose proudly to the surface, raising its head and proclaiming that piece of conventional wisdom which stated that artists were not entitled to any form of payment since what they expressed were spiritual values. And yet, her rational mind opposed this thought, quietly muttering that she had invested in pencils, paper and rubbers, paid for the electrical lighting to draw in the evening. "At least you will be able to buy some new white zinc paint," her mind exhorted her. They were both right.

Her conflicting feelings made her feel as if she were being dragged by wild horses in opposite directions. Not only was she too ashamed to name a price for her work but she was also choked by an indescribable, indefinable awareness of the fact that art stands above money. How could she accept cash? She was an artist and not a shopkeeper, ready to bargain over her merchandise. I beg your pardon, art, not merchandise or goods. ART!

"How much would you be willing to pay for it?" Margrieta muttered, pulling herself together.

"Five roubles. Would that be alright? If you don't mind parting with it ..." the man said, sounding almost angry yet at the same time somewhat reproachful.

"Fine." Margrieta was happy that the torment was over. No, she was no saleswoman. Let him take the drawing and walk away. Even if it was only five roubles, just as long as she didn't have to feel bad about it.

"Say a number from one to nine!"

"Why?"

"Listen to me. Say it! Quickly!"

"Eight..."

"Say one of these words clearly – "in front" or "behind"!"

"Why "behind"?" Margrieta didn't actually want to clarify the situation so she blurted out a question instead, but the word "behind" tapered out before she finished saying it.

"So "behind" it is. Great. Your price, then, for the drawing, the copy, is fifty-eight roubles. Here you are!"

Margrieta stood with her mouth hanging open. That was almost as much as her mum earned in a fortnight.

"Remember, young lady, that the true price of a piece of artwork lies in the numbers you put in front and behind the price you're looking for. A zero in this lengthy procession

changes not only the numbers but lives themselves, too. My name is Ārons Markovičs," he stretched out his hand to her.

"Hmm."

Holding fifty-eight roubles in her hand, Margrieta looked timorously down at the money. It could just as well have been eighty-five, she thought to herself.