

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: Events in this novel unfold in Latvia during the eighties when a degree of change can be felt in the air yet the Soviet regime is still working against the population. There is still no right to freedom of assembly, including the right to associate with any religious group or anything else close to one's heart yet not coinciding with Soviet ideology. The events described in the novel are based on true stories. One of the protagonists in the novel – a teenage boy named Pāvels - gets himself lost in the forest, his aim that of hiding from his own life, and his terrible secret. In the depths of the forest, he comes across a house inhabited by an enigmatic group of people. He has nowhere else to go so decides to stay with these weird, long-haired people who, other than their appearance, also think very differently from anyone else he has ever met. Whilst there, and in order to prove the existence of these people once he gets out of the forest, Pāvels starts keeping a diary. The text has several parallel plot lines and time merges into a single coil while still following a single thread.

Excerpt

Sleep, my baby, sleep – let time take the load

The dawn sun poured its inescapable light between the trees. The shadows gradually vanished, merging together in a sheet of grey. Pāvels stopped, pressed his forehead against the trunk of a fir tree and inhaled. Glancing first at his feet and then to the west, he set off

running again. He didn't want to look back at the flock of crows that, in silence, were following him. They had moved into an unusual spiked formation and were progressing through the air as soundlessly as owls. While still flying, those evil black fiends had already split his body parts up between them. The leftovers would be left, munificently, to the foxes and weasels. Pāvels had decided to call it a day when darkness fell. So long as the sickle-shaped moon didn't conquer the blackness of the dense forest, he would fall into the moss as if it were a soft bed, warmed by the soil's breath. The earth was breathing beneath his feet and branches were breaking. Through the thin rubber soles of his shoes, he felt the living hump of the earth; a warm forest body impregnated with tree trunks. He imagined he would be able to run all night long while the forest grew denser and gloomier in devilish undergrowth close to the Estonian border or, better still, beyond it or, best of all, he wished that the forest and his fear-filled run through it would simply never end.

Before disappearing into the forest, Pāvels had calculated that the forester lived in an easterly direction whilst towards the west, the forest towards the kolkhoz farm would become sparser. The only direction left to run was northwards, where the forest stretched as far as and beyond the Estonian border. He didn't want to run up against borders or foreigners, only the dense forest to hide in and wait things out. When the village wives tell their menfolk what Pāvels has done before running away to the forest to hide, they will have a long, tiresome walk to undertake if they are to find Pāvels asleep on the damp moss. Despite having to use every one of his senses to avoid running into the trees, Pāvels heard ghostly voices from his recent past. Images of people he knew crept out of his memory,

overcoming the distance of time to run slowly alongside him in the shape of ogres, their speech transformed into wails and barks. In the rank closest to him, he could make out his parents and Katerina, all of them slender-bodied, with dog heads and glaring wolves' eyes. Howls mingled with words. Pāvels would have preferred never to forget these voices but it was impossible to hear them if they were wordless. His mother's voice was quiet, sonorous, but his dad's seemed eternally hoarse and crunchy like the snow on the hill behind the house. Amidst the howls and barks of ogres he was able to make out a few words, like son of bitch, degenerate, I wish you had never born, parasite. Maybe the crunching of the snow and the gentle, wordless lullaby would come later when everything else had calmed down. We never remember the faces of those we leave behind – only their voices and touch. Shortly afterwards the disturbing ogres showed themselves and then vanished for good, their voices transformed into deep thuds within his ears.

Pāvels dropped into the moss.

The morning dawned listlessly. The sun, attacking the clumps of moss and mounds of neatly cut branches, brought no joy. There was no regret, either. Pāvels sat up. He had wet his pants. He had no intention of turning back and, even if he had, it wouldn't have been possible as the lichen, despite being as alive as snow, held no footprints. Wrapping his arms around his knees and keeping his head down, Pāvels calculated once more his position in the forest. How long could he last? He sought no more than a little silence after the way he had been living the last few years. He was aware there were no rivers or brooks in this area. It wouldn't be suicide to die of thirst, it would simply be giving up. When he was a child, his

mother had told him a story about crows. Crows, like fate, she had said, were impossible to domesticate.

"What's fate?" Pāvels asked.

"Fate is what happens to a human being, son."

"But don't we just do what happens to us?"

"No, we don't. Who is a human being to do as he pleases?"

"Then who decides what happens in people's lives?"

"Fate, son."

"But what is fate exactly?"

"Fate is a coincidence."

"Then I'll find fate and kill it."

Pāvels let himself fall back into the moss, curled up and started sobbing. As coincidence would have it, it was only himself he could kill.

However, the sunlight dispelled all hopes of death. It warmed and relaxed Pāvels' limbs along with his mind. His tears had dried before falling into the lichen and the flock of crows, perched in a tree, followed his every move, turning their beaks lazily skywards keeping a vigilant eye on his senses and thoughts. Pāvels had no real wish to die since the lack of a wish to live does not always imply a desire for death. But what was he to do? Movement signifies life – a self-generating force. Someone not wishing to live simply keeps moving because he doesn't want to die. Perhaps Pāvels hadn't wet his pants after all, seeing as he wasn't the least bit scared. Why should he wet himself? The wetness between his legs was just moisture from the moss. Pāvels glanced briefly at the flock of crows, stood up and

began walking. He walked along grumpily, trying to avoid the sunlight but the forest was still too sparse. In contrast to the warm light, cold dampness crawled up from the lichen, penetrating the seams of his shoes and reaching his bare feet. Pāvels pushed forward, grasping the trunks of the pine trees with his fingers. He remembered his mum once telling him that if he ever got lost he should look carefully at the tree trunks. The overgrown places are on the northern side but home is always towards the south. Pāvels circled the mighty body of a fir tree but it was clean, not the least bit overgrown. His mum hadn't lied; real trunks should be overgrown but these were not genuine. No mother has ever seen trunks around which a lost child, unable to ever find his way home, might wander. Mothers didn't believe that there were trees which would fail to bring their children back home. Pāvels, however, was on the right path. He sped up.

After several hours of walking, Pāvels' steps grew heavier. His legs were sinking down in the moss, making every step increasingly difficult. It seemed that the earth, always so close to different roots, was telling Pāvels not to leave, that it would be wrong, that his going away wouldn't change a thing. Exactly, Pāvels thought to himself, that's exactly what I thought, nothing would change. Without his noticing, the trees had started speaking, grabbing at Pāvels' clothes with their dry branches like dead fingers. There were hands pushing him forwards but there were also ones dragging him back. Just think, the further you go, the more difficult it is to turn back. You are expected, my friend, expected. Don't stop, my friend, don't ever stop. And if the village men, all of them - bearded and clean-shaven, strong old men - after finding out what you've done, are coming after you, clubs in hands? How would you like to be slogged by one of them? And if you then woke up at home

where your mum wouldn't be there to take care of you because she was dead and your dad would probably hit you because he didn't like what you had done? Now you are a forest brother but at home you would be no more than a shit brother. Speed up, my friend, go faster. Ahead of you, wherever you go, lie vast expanses where no one knows you as yet. They don't know what you've done. Just keep your mouth shut, do you hear me? Even if they're Estonians, don't speak. Words exert enormous power, no matter if they are spoken in a foreign tongue. Take a mouthful of water from the moor and keep quiet, silly boy, forest brother, not shit brother.

The voices of the trees merged into a dense murmur along with his legs that now were sinking deeper and deeper into the green moss. Pāvels held onto a tiny, dried-up tree and yanked one leg vigorously from the bog while the other sank deeper still. The sun had vanished and the trees grew sparser, smaller, until a moss-covered glade emerged in the distance. The birdsong died out; only the crows, not birds at all but shrewd rascals dressed in feathers, flew there then split up and scattered, sitting separately in the small trees in the clearing. Pāvels, now quite breathless, stamped his feet in the moss. Gradually, the marsh water crept higher and higher and he stopped stamping to drink it. The water was cold and bitter. Pāvels, thinking he had heard or seen something, looked around edgily. He put his hand to his mouth, bent down and threw up. Again and again.

Despite having sunk as deep as his ankles, he turned round and started walking southwards, towards home. His hands trembled and his lips kept murmuring something. He tried to run. The crows didn't even move. He was not the first, there was no way out of the marsh, no way. But it wasn't the mire of the bog to turn Pāvels towards home, or the

werewolf in the distance under the root of a tree, or the devil with a flute behind his ear, or the dead body surfacing in the marshy water. These were memories that the bog revealed to Pāvels. He heard human voices laughing and saying that the forest was so dense and deep around there that no mushroom picker would ever wade, lost, as far as the marsh. All the same, folk knew enough about the area for rumours to circulate about a gang of murderous drug-addicts living there. The Druggies, that's what the old people called them. The Druggies have built a log cabin in the middle of the forest, people said, where they lead a fine old life. Even the Milytsia, it was said, couldn't locate them on a map or pinpoint their whereabouts with a crop-spraying plane. They all had to have been children, once lost in the forest, driven to madness by the forest's silence, turning into murderers and drug-addicts. The sense that the Druggies might be leering at him from their hide-away somewhere amongst the fat trees made Pāvels turn around and look beseechingly in the direction of his home.

How could he have forgotten that drug-addicts lived in the forest? Where else could they live? And he started remembering more and more things about them. Recollections, like some sort of long-forgotten dirt he had become accustomed to, tumbled out of his mind. Urban myths about the forest-dwelling drug-addicts and the way they lured new members into their midst. All it took was to shoot up once and that was it, dead and buried, all mother's hard work giving birth and nurturing trampled underfoot, you become useless to society, die as a hanger-on in your own shit. Pāvels' breath was speeding up and his movements became panicky. He started to scream. Not because of the drug-addicts, though. He shouted: "Help!" He shouted: "I'm here!" He begged for rescue until tripping on

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Excerpt

Translated by Žanete Vēvere-Pasqualini

a clump of turf and tumbling headlong. It was not long before he started yelling for help again. This time, Pāvels really needed saving. The eye of the marsh; a blind, black hollow, was pulling him in, deeper and deeper. The more Pāvels resisted, the more cheerful, mobile, soft, open and welcoming the bog became. The flock of crows started to show signs of uneasiness. No, really, this wasn't what was meant to happen.