

Biography: Inga Ābele (née Ingrīda Ābele, 1972) is a prose writer, poet and playwright. Inga Ābele is the author of four novels and three collections of short stories. She is one of the most important Latvian writers of her generation due to her unique style, which embraces the richness of language and human psychology, as well as variety of contexts – different historical times and current issues. Her prose builds powerful imagery and atmosphere. Her characters are created through deep psychological research into their souls. Inga Ābele can precisely make them resonate with the setting, be it a typical Latvian household, Latvian rural scenery or a factual historical era in the past. Inga Ābele is a member of Latvian Writers Union.

Synopsis: The novel *High Tide* addresses the question of why we are so dependent on the past, even when it has turned us into someone else. In the beginning, they were two. They have no values, no horizontals or verticals, and have to create their own. They joke that if something bad happens, they'll help each other end it all. And then something bad does happen. The boy gets sick, and the girl has to kill him. This "killing" turns out to be completely different from what you might see in movies or on stage. Everything turns out to be false, awkward, and horrible. Time goes on. One day, the middle-aged woman realizes she no longer knows whether what happened a long time ago really happened. Who were those two people who once lived together? Who was that girl who killed her boyfriend? Did he even exist if she only remembers him a couple times a year? She has nobody to talk to about it. So she writes, searching for an answer to the question: How many lives do we live in a single lifetime? By writing, she searches for the path to her former self. There is a high tide and a low tide: when you are in one, then you can understand the other. The plot of the novel is both real and imagined. The crime is also a symbol of the suicide we commit after each stage of our lives, in search of an answer to the question: What is it that continues to live?

Excerpt

In the Beginning

God didn't create words.

In the beginning there was a dream.

And at the end there was again nothing but a dream.

God appeared to a woman in a dream that was like death. God

found the woman within this dream and said to her:

"If you agree to live your life in reverse, you'll have the power to give life back to your lover, who died young. Just don't get your hopes up—your meeting at that crossroads will last about twenty minutes, no more. Then he'll continue on toward old age, but you, back to childhood."

The woman agreed immediately.

God said:

"How strange. Do you really value your own life and experiences so little that you're willing to undo all of it without a second thought?"

The woman said nothing.

She remembered this dream when she awoke.

Turns Out—We've Lived

She doesn't need any more advice—models, examples. Maybe she's just on a whole new

level, but right now she doesn't need it. She doesn't read books, newspapers, or magazines, doesn't use the internet or watch TV, doesn't go— God forbid—to the theater. It's like being wrapped in a blanket up to your chin: you see and hear everything, but can't move a muscle. Everything is right there around you, within arms' reach. She wanders the house and now and then picks up something, grabs onto something, touches on something. A sentence from a newspaper, a phrase from a Mexican soap opera, an idea from Proust. They're all always going to be right.

On her walks, Ieva goes around the forest in circles. Then on her birthday she asks herself a question—why do I walk in circles, like a dog chained to a post? Because of my fears? Only because of my harsh, bitter fears? I can walk in a straight line, she tells herself—and whenever I want. But when she does finally walk straight she only *feels* like she's actually getting anywhere. Her surroundings change, but the content doesn't. Big cities are all essentially the same, and every country has farmers wearing plaid, made-in-China shirts. Any new place that she ends up she eventually has a close group of friends a lot like the last. The group will always have a mentor, a lover, someone she'll betray, someone who'll betray her, an enemy, and friends she can talk to and withwhom she can find spiritual healing, rather than wasting money on therapy.

Once in a while she breaks from the campaigns, the marathons, the expeditions, and returns to the doghouse and sits next to her chain. Sits absolutely still, like a Bedouin gazing into the distance, and then writes. Script writing is usually complicated, but all of her scripts are about the same thing. All very clichéd, and when she tries to make excuses to the director he tells her: I need you precisely for the clichés. Because the ending needs to be something predictable.

Her scripts are about how nothing happens because nothing can ever happen. Not a

single molecule is lost in the eternal cycle between the earth and the heavens. Only a pure soul can hope to break free from the carousel of life and death, into the cosmos through the tunnel of light and at a speed that makes everything down to the smallest particle feel simultaneously heavy and weightless. Everything shrinks until it disappears, until it's erased from the memory of the world along with time. But to live your life until your soul is pure

—don't laugh, it's not that easy—you have to become a Buddha, a Christ, or a Mohammed. You have to become light itself, a pure soul. Then you can be on your way. But it's a long way and you'll be scrubbed, doused, and wrung clean until then. Those few mistakes that will haunt you, jolt you awake at night, and force you to keep going on, these mistakes that you carry with you your entire life—in the end they'll destroy you. But keep thinking about them, keep thinking. It's gratifying to keep picking away at them. It will heal you.

Eventually she doesn't even write the scripts herself anymore, just touches up those written by others and sends them in. She takes the finished product and objectively embellishes them. She's done work like that before—adding details to bulletin posters in her school days, a pioneer in the last generation of an aggressive Soviet empire. Her homeroom teacher called it "giving life" to something. "Take it to leva," the teacher often said, "she'll give it some life." And leva would take her black marker and give the dull pencil sketches some life, be it Lenin or the Easter Bunny. A wavering shadow in the distance, a gleam in Lenin's eye, and the tense muscles in his jaw, something she'd seen in her father's face when he shaved in the morning. And Lenin would come to life. The Easter Bunny would, too.

Everything is proof of it—this forced gift of existence—even the tired face of a small-town

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More information: info@latvianliterature.lv

bus driver in the early morning; it speaks of longing, the endless patience you have when scrutinizing good fortune that has unexpectedly dropped into your lap. And what does life offer in return... the quiet hum inside the bus where you can warm up, a change from the frozen and bleak winter landscape... What does it offer in return? A kiss goodbye from your wife before you head out, and the mildly bitter taste of coffee with cream? The early morning fog and a dead moose on the side of a road? Like an Indian who gets glass beads in exchange for gold, you trade the suffering of existence in return for the smell of baking bread. The feel of a dog's wet nose against your hand. The look in your children's eyes. A bird feeder. May it all bring you joy, says this opposing, unwanted, huge opportunity—Life. Truth everywhere, like rows and rows of weeds that need only a bit of rain to grow: a handful of TV shows, a handful of philosophical essays, a handful of tight-lipped snobs, a handful of bartering vendors.

Her mother's mother, Gran, used to say: You'll never know where you'll lose something or where you'll find it, and, if you knew where you'd fall, you'd put a pillow down first. In many ways Gran hadn't outgrown childhood. She had never experienced passion, never been disillusioned, but had remained an innocent; that was her destiny. Her cheerful daily greetings were proof she had never discovered herself, her own anger, or her deeply hidden doubts. Doing so would mean being sent into freedom, out of the Garden of Eden. She had stayed in Eden, playing in rows of sun-ripened, wild strawberries. And among the bustle were all life's sentences: her parents' deaths, her husband and children, the people she loved. But she never said "love" because she didn't know the word, hadn't evolved to words. Gran had been her parents' pride and joy, a helper at the dairy farm with her white apron and silky ash-blonde hair, someone who had never grown to know hatred. More

precisely, she was oblivious to any daggers of hatred aimed at her. Instead they went

through her like she was nothing, because she didn't believe in bad people—just people. Her only sins were her pride and self-reliance. She always had tickets for sugar and bread, but also always had more for extra things. A kind word and a helping hand, the sense to put others before herself... She believed it was her choice and responsibility. She didn't need anything from the Lord God, just some nice Lutheran Christmas songs and spiritual peace. She hadn't unlocked that little door in her heart that led to spite. She stayed in her bud, her entire life spent in it and as a child. God and humanity attack these kinds of people more than anyone else because there's something obnoxious about them. But neither God, nor humanity can use their endless recipes for disaster on these people because these people lack any trace of hate—and God can take a vacation since there's no one to peddle vices to. Having fulfilled her duty to everyone she loved, Gran quickly retreated to her inner child, back into that bud. A small, polite girl who always walked on the sunny side of the street. And that's how she ended her journey. She was stuck in her helpless innocence, and then all the world's charges were piled on top of her. Stay helpless as a baby, an animal, a prisoner, a fool, an alcoholic, a one-legged bum in a tunnel—and the world will quickly chafe you until you bleed, and you'll understand why you've always needed God. You put Heaven on a pedestal while you still have the strength. And when you grow weak you see the devil. Not the one with horns and a tail, but the devil in the hurried compassion of the fast-paced world, the one that will kill you with kindness.

Longing for paradise is nothing different from longing for a strong pair of hands. Forget all the understanding, the kindred souls and greatness of spirit— the most important thing is an Eden of two strong hands when you can't go on anymore, when your mind stops working, when you're just a naked, trembling mass of bare and rotting nerves, a substance without a clear point of view. When you're just a scrap of flesh.

After this experience, after Gran's passing, Ieva lost all illusions she had of herself. No one person can do it all. And though Ieva was capable of a lot, she couldn't maintain the clarity of that stream of goodness. She could fight like a tiger, but it wasn't her thing. There was a story about Ieva—Eve—in the Bible, who ate the forbidden apple and gave it to others, recklessly spreading the poisonous contraband and barreling into death and sin, the dualism between good and evil, the battle between God and Satan. There she was, at the very crossroads of it all, with her black marker in hand. She gave life to everything that crossed her path—sin, holiness, and life itself. She'd never be able to protect anyone, only challenge them. And to what? To life, or death. To find the seven differences between these two pictures.

It's harder for people who are reserved. Reserved people are quiet for years and years, and then they jump off a bridge. But those who constantly hound their friends by whining about their pain and paranoia, they're the ones who keep themselves alive. Knock, and the door will be opened unto you. Maybe not quite opened, but something will definitely change—if that makes you happy. Maybe new wallpaper. Moving to a new apartment. A new perfume. A new perspective. And a new picture. If an irrational hope sparks in your veins now and again, it could even be the moment when you're on the train reading a book translated into Latvian, and in a brief flash you realize that you understand the author, the main character, and the life of the translator. For a second, all three of these personas unite in you, not in a linear sense, but in a predestined, glowing arc. You get inside and can suddenly see through to the bottom of a frozen lake, to the stillness of the undercurrent between motionless water lilies. Then you turn the page and it all disappears. You're back in your own body, you have to buy milk for the kid, and a heart to cook up for the dog—a giant, red, cow heart— and bring it all home, you have to be a

hunter because all around you are nothing but frozen, wintery fields that destroy everything warm and alive.

At times it seems best to not go anywhere, to not read anything, to not say anything. Because this world is like the colored bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. Turn the barrel—see something beautiful. Turn it again—see something entirely different, but still beautiful. Ieva knows that the symmetric shapes in a kaleidoscope are created by a system of mirrors; it's the mirrors' fault, they can only create things that are symmetric... too symmetric. So symmetric it's scary. Honestly, not even truth is that symmetric—only death is. But mirrors can't work any other way.

She's not a reserved person, she isn't. She walks through the woods and talks to trees, dogs that cross her path, and will even talk to strangers now and then. But she steers clear of giving and receiving advice. She'd like to make it through the woods without a chaperone. She doesn't need an encyclopedia of plants or a map. At least not now. But she does need the woods. A full-blown forest with trees, moss, and that intoxicating scent of the sky—the cold air and the icy dampness of tree roots under a blanket of ferns in the fall. It's the best in November. Or in the heavy, stuffy July swelter, when everything is dry to the bone and like the forest itself is storing up fire, it's as withered as an old miser hunched over his pile of riches and as dangerous to itself as a propane tank by an open flame. The forest is in her schema and in the schema of others like her, her chemical make-up contains this secret element—the woods. But then she goes to the desert and observes its inhabitants, observes its elders, who understand that they can't go anywhere.

You can't take shelter from anything in the desert because there isn't anywhere you can hide. All you can do is stand still in the narrow shadow of your hut and gaze into the

distance with chewing tobacco stuck under your mustache, or without the tobacco. Just

sit and observe, without any progress. No forest, no progress. The elders sit and look into the distance and watch the imperceptible, forever shifting traces of wind and water on the sands.

But those who have a fire inside them, they put the fire out as best they can— Ieva included. She separates herself so the fire no longer reaches her thoughts. All her running around is nothing more than putting out fires. And sometimes she takes the dog along with her because it's no good going out by herself. Some of the scenery opens up in her chest like a crashing wave of joy. Other times it's like slow foam at her feet. Other times still are like a shot to the veins—like a burning that makes her heart beat rapidly and sweat break out on her forehead. Something always opens up to her when she goes walking. Oh, this small illusion of movement. She doesn't need anything else.

People just need to be understood, she thinks to herself. The world needs to be understood. People are like shoes—you can't fit every one onto the same shoetree. The leather of every shoe has unique curves, seams, wears. And it takes time to see this. She's already been on her share of carousels—there's nothing wrong with that. After a typically calm breakfast, she throws herself into the passage of time, lets herself be rattled apart so she overflows with awareness and all the trivialities that keep her alive. She pours the tiny, crushed pieces at the foot of her impasse, wails, cries, and then everything is quiet for a while, wonderfully quiet, still and frozen and beautiful. The world works like a well-oiled machine with parameters, barometers, altimeters and chronometers. You like long and short distances, beginnings and ends, and are particularly fond of the middle ground. Going to work, home and car loans, children and parents, even unmarried godmothers. If it weren't for the cold and the constant rotation, who knows if you'd be

able to value that small mechanism—the stirrup, hammer, or anvil, whatever that little

bone is called—the balancing mechanism in your ear that keeps you upright. Your vestibular apparatus.

The red substance of everyone's blood is the same—slow-flowing and completely saturated with time and diverse archives. It's always a hot substance; however, which creates more? Time or blood? And if it's both, why live beyond that? After there's no one left on earth to tuck you in, to accept you with implicit love, to take you exactly as you are. To take joy in watching what you do, in whose eyes you would simply be good... When there's no one left like that, who will you be able to be yourself in front of? Because you always find a bond with those who tuck you in, or throw you a rope to pull you ashore, or who profess something to you in the world of absolute chaos in which we have to live, where the sun alone moves along the same path and where daylight creeps over the windowsill like ivy. Other than that, everything has changed. And you're not being told anything revelatory, but rather—and aren't the values of the modern world strange?—the same old things you need to survive. Even Ieva has been told something like this. Two—no, three—things for survival. The first two are: never sit on stone before you hear thunder, and don't stand in drafts. Obviously, these have to do with the same damn bundle of nerves. They get damaged by cold and drafts—you'll start pissing blood if you don't watch out. You'll shrivel up like a gnarled branch if you're not careful.

But the third thing was explained to her in a roundabout way—through a story. Her Gran, the person who gave her this advice, had worked before World War II as a servant for a rich family in Riga. She'd only worked for them a month to save up enough for a place to live in this new city.

"Sweetheart," she had told Ieva, "I knew full well I'd only work for them a short time, so I

put up with everything with dignity and had enough strength and energy for each new

day. When I left them after a month they cried and didn't want me to go because they had never had a servant as good as me."

This story meant that everything would eventually pass, even life. Maybe whatever it was would last more than a month, but it would pass. Each view, each landscape, even you. It's a solution, at least until the moment you're more sick of life than of death, when all you see on the horizon are black, burnt-out clearings, when you hate life so completely that your body is overcome by agonizing tremors just thinking about it. Thank you, Gran.

Because, honestly, Ieva doesn't call herself a girl anymore, and sometimes even says that beautiful word—middle-aged. Yes, right now she'd like to consider herself middle-aged. She's already experienced middle age physically—the thought came to her on the morning of her thirty-third birthday. On that morning she felt she was standing at the very top of a mountain. And this mighty, craggy mountain ridge extended in both directions, its outline melting into the distant golden sunrise. The ridge was tall and black, but oddly enough there was plenty of oxygen and her blood wasn't coursing out of control. Instead there was a damp, refreshing easterly wind, up there the stars were twinkling, meshing in the blueness like white knots. Things were very good. Right now things are very good, she's not thinking about the road here or about the climb down; everything is here and now, everything is halfway. And the only thing that hurts is the awareness that she has climbed up from the direction of the sea, but has to descend into the desert. The knowledge stings a bit, like a once-broken collarbone that aches every time it rains. But you get used to it.

Then the day comes: her life is halfway over and she's walking through the woods on a fall morning. The golden asp leaves rustle around her, the earth exhales coolly, and the sky is as blue as her boyfriend's eyes. And her life is half-over and, now and then, something will

happen as time goes on. For example, there have been a lot of births, a few deaths, there will be something that will ache in her over her entire life, something she will never be able to fix, something she will have to dismiss—and so on and so forth. She walks through the woods and feels that she'll soon reach that critical point when the cup will be full, and when the handle breaks it won't go unnoticed. The cool glass of the milk bottles from her childhood and the triangular tetrapacks with the word MOLOKO on them—she can't forget those either. Or the piles of the newly-freed country's money in suitcases, her first real paycheck—an entire roll of colored paper—frozen kidneys and peed pants, her first time with a boy she would never see again, her first time in an airplane, her first time abroad and seeing strange things. The person you slowly but completely left because he was fading, even though he begged you to stay. Your heart's betrayals, your wild, spiteful spirit and brief moments of respite, your contracts with your conscience, your father and mother, and your travels near and far, when you fell in love with cities, the sky, or entire regions of uninhabited land.

Love doesn't always have to be about people, no, not necessarily. You can fall in love with a city, its many smells, how quiet it is under the snow. Small and large streets and the dusk in the glowing windows that awakens a desire in you, when you stand in the streets with your eyes glazed over simply from wanting to experience every imaginable life, everything behind those windows. You want to tear them from the walls and place them in your chest simply because you know and understand it all. Simply because you love these blinds, curtains, shades, the fraying bits of carpet behind the flowerpots against the walls and windows. A quick or fancy dinner, cats on windowsills, and boiling pots in kitchens.

And how calm he is when he comes home from work. And how she tilts her head for him to kiss her cheek. Here is your victory, your life in these basic, little things that everyone

will gulp down until the end of time like they're dehydrated and, when they're drunk from it, roam along the courtyard walls, craving only that eternal shift between night and day.

The shade and a nap on a striped couch while he makes you tea. A moment within yourself in the cozy warmth, when the hands of the clock don't stab at your dry, tired eyelids like steel knives. You'll crave the solitude of an old woman, her cat, her parties, and bed full of crumbs from the grandchildren, especially in November, and inside is bright and cozy while outside it's dusky and cool, and a little freezing. Outside where you stand with your only heart and life in your chest, knowing it all—but how?—and loving, loving, loving it. But there is only this moment in the present, this excessive, ruthless sense of awareness, and the acrid scent of the earth.

Why do I walk around with an orchestra playing in my head?