

Hans Christian Andersen  
Award 2020



Peter Svetina

*Author nomination*

Slovenian section of IBBY



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## 1 Biographical information of the candidate

Peter Svetina was born in 1970 in Ljubljana. In 1995 he graduated in Slovenian Studies and defended his PhD thesis on Old Slovenian Poetry in 2001 (both at Faculty for Arts, University Ljubljana, Slovenia). He is an associate professor for Slavic literature at the Institute for Slavic languages, Alpen-Adria University, Klagenfurt, Austria. He writes for children, young adults and adults, but his work often crosses the borders between different target audiences and can be read as crossover literature. His literary debut was a picture book called *The Walrus who Didn't Want to Cut his Nails* (1999), which soon served as the basis for a puppet play, a path later followed by many of his works (e.g. *Mr. Constantine's Hat*). His books for children and youth have been translated into English, German, Spanish, Korean, Polish, Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian. Svetina's works often play with occurrences and images from his everyday life. They reflect not only his home town of Ljubljana and the destinations of his travels, but also his scholarly interests – Svetina's scientific research is focused on old Slovenian poetry, children's and youth literature (especially its socially and politically directed transformation after World War II), and detective novels. He translates poetry and children's literature from English, German, Croatian, and Czech and works as an editor for poetry collections and literature textbooks for primary school. His books have received some of the most prestigious national and international awards and are immensely popular among literary critics as well as young readers.

## 2 A high-resolution portrait photograph of the candidate



Photo: Tatjana Splichal

### 3 A statement on the candidate's contribution to literature for children and young people

Igor Saksida:

#### The Diverse and Communicative Nature of Peter Svetina's Fiction for Children and Young Adults

Peter Svetina's children's and young adult fiction begins with easily understandable, sometimes explicit patterns of communication: his first two animal fairy tales, *The Walrus who Didn't Want to Cut His Nails* (*O mrožku, ki si ni hotel striči nohtov*, 1999) and *The Little Walrus Gets Glasses* (*Mrožek dobi očala*, 2003), deal with the issue of difference and acceptance, establishing a sort of intertextual dialogue with older texts focusing on similar subjects (e.g. Svetlana Makarovič: *A Special Kind of Squirrel* (*Veveriček posebne sorte*, 1994)). After his first forays into children's literature, Svetina's poetry and stories develop along two distinct paths: towards language play on the one hand, and towards real-life topics on the other; however, both developments reflect the author's distinctive poetics of combining nonsense and realism, including problem fiction.

Svetina's poetry books are extremely varied and represent one of the high points of contemporary Slovenian poetry. Svetina's first book of poetry, *By-World* (*Mimosvet*, 2001), could be categorized as a collection of problem poetry, although growing up is not shown against a background of symbolic concepts, typical of children's and young adult poetry at the time – instead, the poems show the reality as child-like and playful. Svetina's return to the flashes from the uncomplicated (but not naïve or idealized) children's world is one of the foremost characteristics of his poetics of the "message minimum," which transcends the tradition of the complex linguistic innovation of late modernist poetry. On the other hand, language play is the basis of the brilliant *Poems from the Washing Machine* (*Pesmi iz pralnega stroja*, 2006), wherein Svetina combines nonsense with taboo words and a lyrical attitude towards nature; many of the texts in the book are also visual poems, meaning that the collection provides the youngest readers with a glimpse of the possibilities of poetic expression without ever being pushy about it. Svetina's *Homework* (*Domače naloge*, 2014), another book of poetry, moves away from the poetics of language play; although one can still detect wordplay typical of nonsense poetry (e.g. play with letters, unusual neologisms), the poems are predominantly based on the real world of the modern child, who is not just playful and appreciative of the wonders of nature, but also sometimes lonely:

*For grandma to come  
for us to school,  
for kitty to wait for us  
on our doorstep.*

*For someone to be home*

*when we come from school,  
for us not to be alone,  
I ask you, our Father,  
I ask you, mom.*

(“Homework on Prayer”)

and aware of impermanence:

*On a white field  
a crow pecks  
forgotten autumn’s  
breadcrumbs.*

*From afar, it looks  
like a breadcrumb  
itself.*

*Will it be pecked  
as well?*

(“Homework on Crows”)

A similar topic is at the centre of *Prayers from the Stairs* (*Molitvice s stopnic*, 2016), a poetry book based on an infrequently encountered subject, a child’s reflections on God. The book also deals with gratitude, fear, aging, and intergenerational dialogue. As such, the collection could easily have fallen to preachiness or idealization, however, Svetina avoids both pitfalls. His reflections also remain sufficiently concrete so as to give young readers a chance to engage in dialogue with the frequently ambiguous poetry that is both playful and serious at the same time.

Svetina’s storytelling is similar to his poetry, combining a realistic environment with elements of nonsense and lyricism, comedy with folklore (fairy tale subjects) and linguistic experimentation with a non-intrusive moral evaluation of the character’s actions. The Slovenian-English story *Anton’s Circus* (*Antonov circus*, 2008) occurs in an urban environment, where Anton and Leopold the Lion resist the boring modern times with an unusual circus show that is a combination of intertextual fairy tale references and opera. The nonsense urban motifs are also typical of a number of Svetina’s other tales, such as *Mr. Constantine’s Hat* (*Klobuk gospoda Konstantina*, 2007) and *How Mr. Felix Took Part in a Bicycle Race* (*Kako je gospod Feliks tekmoval s kolesom*, 2016). In both of these stories, the power of imagination is combined with a keen sense of the poetic aspects of the city, focusing on the value of seemingly unimportant details (e.g. a hat or an old bicycle), friendship and kindness. Nonsense is also one of the formal guiding principles of the cross-genre book of poetry and short stories *The Lumber Room* (*Ropotarna*, 2012): the author transforms various names, creates words out of letters and numbers, uses mirror text (which

can be read by using an actual mirror), toys with fairy tale motifs (the frog, the princess, the vodyanoy), and shows the wonders of imaginary travels of people and objects through space and time. The game of nonsense betrays a deeper message, e.g. about the value of art (“Opera Beggar”) and creativity that can nowadays exist anywhere and at any time, even in the play of tiny fruit stickers (“The Sticker Fairy Tale”). Recently, Svetina is most recognized for his unique nonsense stories that feature unusual animals with similarly unusual names (hippos Hubert and Marcel, František the Water Buffalo, Franci the Cheetah, etc.). Young readers are first introduced to such characters in *Hippopotamus Wisdom (Modrost nilskih konjev, 2010)*: in their world there is no place for the frenzy of human modernity. Nonsense wordplay and story ideas are combined with a focus on friendship and care for the other and the characters are filled with wonder at everything around them: the wisdom of their existence is that anybody can be child-like and ask seemingly irrelevant (absurd) questions and then try to answer them with the same “logic” of nonsense – only to coexist with another in the dialogue of questions and answers, to hang out and talk (as in “What’s Most Important”):

*Tanami the Zebra came by. She visited her friends on her way back from the store.  
“What are you doing?” she asked. “Oh, nothing,” said Marcel. “We’re just talking.”  
“That’s what’s most important,” said Tanami and joined them.*

A similar poetics is reflected in *The Ripening of Porcupines (Kako zorijo ježevci, 2015)*, another collection that includes both linguistic and story-based nonsense. The former is expressed in literal interpretation of phrases and in repetitions that rob words of their meaning but also imbue them with new content, e.g. “*could also be the possum traffic officer Ferdinand, or traffic officer Ferdinand the Possum, or Ferdinand the Possum Traffic Officer*”, as well as in lists, repetitions and hyperbole – e.g. in “A Bus Stop in Twelve Parts”. All these elements come together in an intriguing “opposite world” that continuously throws the reader off balance and underlines the living, surprising, even challenging nature of language itself. The self-sufficient joy of creating new words and combining them in a pastiche of nonsense is logical, internally consistent, and intertextual, containing numerous quotes from and references to known works of literature. Alongside the unusual protagonists (possum, porcupine, zubr, ermine, nutria) that in themselves arouse the reader’s curiosity, the most significant feature of the book is its veiled message – readers are told in a very unobtrusive manner that it is important to give others a visit from time to time, to be someone’s lighthouse, to dare to be fearsome like Genadij the Cricket, and most importantly, to ask important questions: *How to train a shadow? How to paint the wind? What is it like to be inside music like an ant inside a clarinet?*

Svetina has received many awards for his works (including the main Slovenian award for children’s literature Večernica, which he has received three times) and has long been recognised as a significant author by literary critics, teachers of literature, and the literary field in general. He is generally included in all decent textbooks and reviews of contemporary Slovenian children’s literature. We believe this to be **good justification for Peter Svetina to become a candidate for the Hans Christian Andersen Award.**

## 4 One or more appreciative essays, interviews or articles

I) Svetina, Peter: "Devetnajst točk avtopoetike" / "My Poetics in Nineteen Points". *Otrok in knjiga*, issue 100 (2017), pp. 7-9.

1. One's poetics is a reflection of one's own artistic creation. In contrast with (literary) theory, which observes and describes, poetics is prescriptive. It is thus a reflection of writing and literary techniques the author knowingly prescribes to himself or unknowingly adheres to.
2. The family that I'm descended from has always nurtured two virtues: respectful stubbornness and generosity. I take no credit for having been born into this setting.
3. Receptiveness is a deliberate readiness to accept what comes to you. For a writer, receptiveness is not an immutable fact; rather, it is the result of training. Being receptive and writing in the early hours of the morning help the writer avoid or reduce self-censorship.
4. Weirdos are people who refuse to conform in spite of the expectations of the majority. Their values and behaviour patterns do not conform to the values and behaviour patterns of the majority but may nevertheless be incidentally aligned with them. The existence of weirdos is a sign of a bearable social environment. When a literary author writes about weirdos, this is a sign of the author's personal affinity for them on one hand and a signal to the reader that such people exist on the other. If the writer presents weird characters sympathetically, the reader will feel sympathy for them as well.
5. Subversiveness is non-conformity of ideas or ideology that is not immediately apparent; it is the practice of hiding thumbtacks inside dominant social patterns, norms and preferences. To put it differently, subversiveness is an irritation that is generally not immediately noticed or sensed by its intended targets. In today's western society of acceleration, the mere abundance of free time can be subversive: subversiveness may be embodied by characters who take time to talk to each other and to observe things. Even the reading of stories may be subversive. If the writer is not concerned with whether their text will be published or not, they can be more relaxed in their non-conformity with the preferences and demands prevalent in their community.
6. An inclination towards comedy and nonsense may be inherent to one's character but is mostly the result of training. The picture of life painted from a comedic or nonsense-based perspective is no less true than one painted from a tragic, terrifying or melodramatic viewpoint. In each case, the work picks fragments out of reality and uses them to create a literary world, which, although in itself an illusion, is not necessarily any less true than the reality that exists outside of literature.

7. I believe people, when they're not sleeping, have at least two types of awareness. One is functional awareness, which allows people to carry out their everyday routines – drive a car, cross a pedestrian crossing, buy a fish or a salad, adequately answer a child's questions. The other kind of awareness is aligned in the same direction but separated from the first as the sidewalk is separated from the road. The second kind of awareness allows for creativity, is a creative awareness. A sports competition may be creative as well. It is similar to a state of trance. When practising this type of awareness, one has no sense of time, of hunger or cold, and does not notice when one has to go to the bathroom. The author who has written a text in this state of mind is generally unable to relate how the text was created.
8. In certain circumstances, this creative state of mind can be maintained and easily returned to. Returning to it allows the author to write intensely, even if a day, or more, has gone by since they have concluded their previous writing session. Constant or oblivious use of the phone, internet or television deadens the author's creative awareness and strands him in the functional (or even dysfunctional) awareness.
9. Texts are created in different circumstances. They are also created in different locations. Steady movement – walking, riding a train or driving a car, though the driving must not be stressful – may stimulate the creative process. The author can simply commit the scenes for his story to memory or jot them down in a notebook as they occur.
10. In the text, these scenes and images combine with no regard to the author's real life or the details of their autobiography. The images that follow each other in a text may come from wildly different times and totally different places. The literary text creates a new reality, which is what the reader is interested in; the reader doesn't care about the (auto)biographic accuracy of the story – and this is not the story's aim.
11. The text is generally finalized at home or in an environment that at the time provides a substitute for home.
12. The activities of reading and translating beget new literature. Reading and translating, the writer learns of new literary techniques, which they may then try out in their own texts.
13. Literary elements that deserve observation and warrant study and reflection are: the speech of literary characters, composition of the text, ellipsis, metaphors, associations, wordplay and titles.
14. Everybody has a name. Everybody is called by their name. If a character lacks a name, it is actually a type.
15. Those who speak much may hear little. I believe an author needs to observe and listen to fill up their creative batteries. If the batteries are mostly empty, writing is merely a trade, though it may be carried out well.

16. If, after editing, the text is not missing anything that the author deems essential or central, there is no reason for the text to be longer. If a text is good, it will still be good six months or a year later.
17. If you finish your lunch when you could still take a couple of bites more, you'll remember it much better than you would if you stuff yourself to the point of bursting. Writing is similar: if the author has managed to end their text at a point when the reader would still be ready to read further, a chemical reaction has been set off in the reader, which will extend the text further; readers will generally retain more of such texts than of those that they had finished in their heads before the writer had done so on paper. Open endings and things that remain unsaid can only intensify the effect of the work.
18. Searching and a certain amount of experimentation improve the vitality of both the author and his texts.
19. If you have said what you had to say, it may be time to stop writing.

II) Svetina, Peter, Zemljič, Petra: "Brez domišljije in razmišljanja je človek semafor" / "Without Thought and Imagination, a Man Is a Traffic Light." *Otrok in knjiga*, issue 99 (2017), pp. 84-87.

*The Prayers from the Stairs are extraordinarily genuine, writes the jury when explaining your nomination this year. And it's true, they're convincing thanks to their "minimalist expression". Is that generally typical of your writing? That you avoid complicating your stories and overburdening your young readers?*

I've always liked stories and poems that don't tell me everything, that stop at a certain point, leave some things unsaid, which I have to complete using my own imagination or my own sense of what should have been said. I think it does a story good if something is left open and you're forced to try to actively understand it. I don't think about these things in advance, I just remove superfluous elements from my poems and stories until I come to a point where it seems that further editing would change what I wanted to say. That's the point where I stop.

*Why is the child talking to a short-sighted grandfather, a frightened cat, an aunt who can't have children, etc.?*

There's no particular philosophy behind that: it's just that one can most convincingly describe a world that one knows.

*The poems, simple and even naïve, address children. Do you see in your mind's eye whom you're writing for, how old they'd be and whether they'll understand what you're saying, as you're writing?*

When I was writing the *Prayer from the Stairs*, I wasn't thinking about those who'd be reading them and I wasn't concerned with whether they'd understand them – I was thinking about the one who's saying them. I lent my voice to a little girl who had just started school, that's how old Maruška, daughter of illustrator Mojca Osojnik, and my daughter Klara were at the time. Actually, it all started with my translation of prayers by Slovak poet Milan Rúfus. Afterwards, I went to give some lectures in Konstanz, which is where Mojca Osojnik was living with her family at the time. So we went to a confectioner's one afternoon. Mojca and Barbara, my wife, sat down at the table, while I and Maruška simply sat on a window ledge and talked. And Maruška said to me that her teacher had told them that their food was from God, but that she knows that it's actually from her mother. That's when everything came together. I simply tried to put myself in the world of a girl as old as Maruška or Klara.

*And thus you've treated your young readers to your honesty, simplicity, empathy, to your "love somebody" attitude. But adults aren't left cold by your poetry either. Your world is inspiring.*

So I've been told, yes. I don't really know who is more touched by the prayers: the children, their parents or their grandparents. Maybe they're too close to the children after all, I don't know, and maybe that's why the child's perspective seems more touching to their parents, who have lived longer and are thus touched by a child's naivete, directness and honesty when they read about them.

*Literature also has to be exciting. Children, when left to themselves, like to fight against boredom with shiny things that don't really excite their imagination. But children definitely need thought and imagination, don't they?*

Yes, of course they do, you can hardly skip and dance across the meadows if you don't have legs to stand on, no matter how much you want to. What makes me sad sometimes are the parents, well, adults, who sometimes cut off the legs of children's imagination. Every child is born curious and inquisitive – and more or less cheeky, in one way or another; but I believe every child has some curiosity. If you feed it, it'll grow, and if you don't, it'll be stunted. But without thought and imagination, man, I believe, is just a traffic light, programmed to turn from red to orange to green and left to stand there and light up. Can you imagine a traffic light strolling around and flashing all its three colours at the same time?

*And they deserve to get their joy from many different sources. You, with your stories and your focus on language, are an important fount.*

Parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles, as well as kindergarten teachers, are important sources of language, of course. All those people whom children like to hug and talk to. I believe language acquired in such a way in childhood is like a warm, cosy room to which you keep returning. This of course includes the language of poets. But if these voices are not heard in a safe, comfortable atmosphere, I believe they're only half, or perhaps only a quarter

as effective. Now, of course it's important that good stories and good poetry are written and published, in one way or another, this is a way of preserving cultural memory. I think that a child who has been given the serenity of language when they were young will read everything in a different manner once they start reading by themselves.

*If we want our language to remain rich, children's authors shouldn't ignore subtleties, the sound of what they're saying, the layering of meanings and so on. You seem to be well aware of that.*

I'm aware of it to the extent that I know that all these things exist and can be used, yes. But when to use a rhyme at the end of the line and when to use it in the middle, when to use it in a story, how many should there be and should they be simple or unusual and complex – all this is mostly a question of feeling, not of conscious reflection. Maybe it's like when you buy for example a used Renault 5: you're suddenly amazed at how many used Renaults 5 have appeared on the roads. But there are no more and no fewer than they were a month ago, when you hadn't bought yours yet. It's a similar thing with words: if you read, reflect and generally spend all your time dealing with words and you have a feel for them, it doesn't really take a decision to use them in a text anymore – you simply use what you're familiar with, and you're familiar with what you're surrounded by, what you live in. Am I complicating this too much?

*No. But one should never underestimate children, in your opinion?*

I think that from the moment you know a child is coming into this world, you should speak in a non-affected, non-artificial manner, and not use baby talk, even though it seems that children gravitate towards such words and like listening to them and understand them. No. I think one should be equally respectful to all beings.

*By involving religious faith, your writing could easily have become idealized or preachy. But it didn't. Why religion at all? And how to remain a storyteller and not become a preacher?*

Religion is a part of our spiritual world. Close to some of us but not to others, practised by some of us but not by others. But it's a part of our world. When I was researching and studying Slovenian literature from the interbellum, I encountered a number of great poems, e.g. by Oton Župančič, Anica Černež, Karel Širok, that dealt with a child's spirituality, a number of really wonderful texts. However, after World War II, these were taken out of poetry books, anthologies and textbooks, simply because they dealt with religion, Christianity. I find it unfortunate that texts of this kind had not been written for half a century, unfortunate because neither the children nor the adults who had read to them were able to reflect on children's spirituality, religiosity through literature. At a certain point, it seemed to me as if the post-war Slovenian children's literature lacked one of the poles of spirituality. Well, if you develop something steadily, you'll get both good and bad things throughout this development. But if you stagger development, I wonder whether quality texts

would appear on their own accord after half a century – if you don't let something develop, you can't expect to skip the preaching phase. I think spirituality and religion have their place in literature, just like imagination and the material world. After all, one does not preclude the other.

*What places do you visit when you're filling up your reservoir with ideas? Because it seems there's lots of everything in there. For years and years, you've been giving us a variety of things, and the reservoir still doesn't seem to be empty. What else are you going to pull out and present to our children?*

Last year, when I wrote the story *I Recognised You by Your Red Socks*, which deals with the relationship between father and child, and the *Ear of the World*, which deals with listening – well, after I'd done that, I felt as if I'd said what I had to say in children's literature, that I was done with it. For the longest time I felt no need to write, I believed I had nothing left to say, and if I have nothing left to say, it's probably better not to fill up my hard drive and not to waste paper, right? However, this summer, in August, there was a certain period of tranquillity, and my batteries were full enough as well, it would seem. What came out was a number of short stories, really short ones. When I was transcribing them the other day, about 40 of them took up less than ten pages. Now I'll let them stand for a while, and if they still seem good in six months, I'll give them to an editor. If they don't, well, then I'll publish something else, a translation, maybe.

*In The Neighbour under the Ceiling you make reflections on life and life's wisdom seem light and fleeting. Twenty short stories that have everything. How did you write them?*

In various ways, I mean, at various locations and based on various experiences. But on the other hand, in a quite consistent manner, with a reasonably constant attitude of rambunctiousness, rowdiness, that I was able to maintain. Seeing ordinary things as slightly extraordinary. Mostly, the stories are based on very real people or very real events or locations. For instance, our neighbour does indeed have a house full of pianos. And a friend and his children really did make a fishing net while vacationing on the coast, a fishing net that disappeared the very next day. It was probably just taken by someone, but a fishing net running along the bottom of the sea and then on land and in the sky certainly makes for a more exciting story. And that's how it was, from story to story.

*How did you collaborate with your illustrators? A picture can really enhance a story. Did you find that the illustrations took your stories to a higher level?*

Ana Zavadlav and Peter Škerl really know a lot about stories, about drawing, about colours and composition. I didn't really have to accommodate them much, it was they who had to accommodate my texts as they received them: the editors sent them my texts, such as they were, and they had to use them to create texts of their own, through illustration, of course. I always enjoy seeing the results. When I receive the scans, I sit in front of the screen, looking

them over once, twice, three times, and then again in the evening. And then I find myself thinking that the illustrations could never have been different from what they are. It's quite charming, seeing what they're able to do and how good it is. The best I can do is try to imagine something like what they create in my head.

*You have already received many awards, or have at least been close. Why does one have to have (love for) awards?*

One primarily has to have love for what one does. On one hand, awards are a recognition that you have been good enough at what you love doing that this has been noticed by a group of experts in this field. But on the other hand, awards are a burden. Everybody starts thinking, wow, look what you've created, look what you've accomplished. If they knew how little really depends on the author, they'd marvel more at the works themselves and celebrate them instead of the author.

III) Svetina, Peter, Forstnerič-Hajnšek, Melita: "Praznil sem predale, potem pa žrebal"/"I Turned out Drawers and Picked out Random Bits and Pieces": Intervju s Petrom Svetina/Interview with Peter Svetina *Otrok in knjiga*, volume 40, issue 87 (2013) pp. 42-45.

*The Lumber Room, your awarded book, is a very provocative work; at the same time, you and the illustrator, Damijan Stepančič, are an extremely coherent team. How did your wordplay, the wild associations of these texts, the oscillation between poetry and prose mesh together with the illustrator's playfulness and inventiveness? Were you already in communication when the book was coming together?*

Well, the coherence, if it comes through, is probably due to us knowing each other. We talk a lot when we meet. In some cases, we meet often, in others, less so. I think we mostly know what to expect from one another. I find it a bit unfair when only one of the authors receives an award in such cases – I believe texts on their own could never work so well if it weren't for those exact illustrations in the book and for that exact book design.

*Did you find the various old texts that make up The Lumber Room in your dusty drawers, did you add new ones? How exactly did this seemingly chaotic universe of forgotten objects and unusual heroes come together?*

The book was created by taking some old texts that I hadn't included in any of the previous ones. Odds and ends, mostly. And then I wrote some new ones as well. At the end, as I discussed the index and how to really make the book similar to a lumber room with Gaja Kos, the editor at the Miš publishing house, it finally occurred to us: I'd ask my daughter to do a random draw of the texts' numbers. So I wrote out the index,

numbered each story, put the numbers in a bag, and my daughter drew the order of the stories. The texts in the book thus came to be ordered randomly.

*However, the book doesn't give the impression of randomness, but of solid construction and a deliberate dramatic arc.*

That's funny. So it seems that there's some logic to it after all. I'm sure it wouldn't have turned out so well if I had thought it out thoroughly. And now it is what it is.

*A friendly commotion, the meshing of different genres, forms, rhetorical devices, a veritable whimsical encyclopaedia of everything, poetic shifts, oscillation between the conscious and the subconscious – you are simply amazing! First you grab the reader's attention with a long fairy tale and then immediately, on the very next page, confuse them with nonsense, your signature mode of writing, or perhaps help them relax with gentle tercets. How does Svetina the literary theorist and historian interfere with Svetina the author? Or are they partners?*

They're partners, I'd say. I'm generally never bothered by literary theory when I write. While I had done some work on meter, I don't think I'd be able to continuously produce convincing rhymes, so I generally avoid such writing. Reading is actually what helps me most, as well as translating, which is just very close reading. One internalizes a lot of such stuff and then writes like that without even realizing it. Of course readers can then recognize your influences here and there, after all, literature usually begets literature, and I find that constructive. I doubt my texts would be as they are today if it hadn't been for my studies and the books I'd read.

*The index of weirdos at the end of your book includes yourself, the illustrator, the editor, as well as Nebuchadnezzar, Beethoven, etc. In addition to the standard table of contents, there's also an "index of all sorts of things." Why all these indexes – to make the readers flex their brains as they finish the book?*

There's another weirdo in the index whose only listed appearance is on the index page itself. And the "index of all sorts of things" includes an appendix, maybe somebody will go looking for it, which resides on a page that's no longer in the book and whose number is very similar to a phone number one would perhaps need to call if they encountered the subject of the appendix up close and personal. Anyway, I first saw such an abundance of indexes in Petr Šrámek's anthology of Czech children's poetry. There was a chronological index of authors by date of birth, an index of titles, an index of first lines, an index of lines by length, etc. So I said to myself, why not use such a scientific apparatus, footnotes, etc. with children's literature. The indexes are thus part of the "scientific apparatus". And if the book is supposed to be a lumber room, let everything be in a giant heap, together with names and things that appear in the book. I selected things more or less by feel, while the other index does indeed list all the weirdos.

*As you contemplate your oeuvre, where does The Lumber Room fit in? Some of the stories are similar to those in The Magic Ring, and the characters are comparable as well. The book is quite daring, but could it have turned out chaotic, even impenetrable?*

Of course. I think it was quite a courageous move on the part of the publisher to put out a book like this. I myself wanted to do an inconsistently illustrated book, one made out of various odds and ends, with dissimilar texts tossed in a heap without thought to order, as in a lumber room. What's funny is that a certain order eventually arose without actually being put there. Damijan had his work cut out for him as he nevertheless had to arrange the disorder into some kind of order, an impression, at least, of a visual balance of things. And with reference to daring that you make – yes, I guess I sometimes do such things deliberately. With the hippos, I also intentionally left in the beer and cigarettes. Some things always have to be a bit different, something has to diverge from the predetermined system of expectations. I believe a text must excite the reader, that's what makes one think, after all; whether they cry, laugh or fume over it, if the text elicits a reaction, that's it. A colleague once seriously complained to me about me writing a story about a walrus that refused to cut his nails, because apparently his nephew had now stopped allowing his nails to be cut as well. But what can I say – cough – that's not my problem anymore.

*In a sense, The Lumber Room is your ars poetica. It contains everything that has appeared throughout your work up to now. From the fact that you're inspired to write by real, tangible events, to music, fatherhood, etc. A few years ago, you also wrote a guide on fostering family literacy. Is The Lumber Room really a concentrate of everything?*

Perhaps it is. I rarely think about my work in these terms, truth be told, I'm bad at thinking about what I write in general, I'm too involved. I can do it with others, but not with myself. Just as you can't see your mistakes on second reading, I have a hard time talking about my works and evaluating them. But yes, maybe it's true that all my previous work can be found in this book – short and long fairy tales, nonsense, poetry, and some of that deliberateness I'd mentioned before.

*What are your writing principles? What inspires you, where do you get most of your ideas?*

Let's take a look at my fairy tale about the vodyanoy that went to a thermal spa. In general, there are few vodyanoyes in Slovenian literature, but I'm terribly fond of them. There's plenty in Czech literature, and I feel close to the Czechs as I'd studied in Prague. The Czech's attitude towards the devil is interesting as well. He's often presented as a good guy, a simpleton that anybody can pull a fast one on. He's not a jerk, like in Slovenia.

Another experience connected to the fairy tale about the vodyanoy that went to a thermal spa was our family visit to one of the Danish islands where there was a skansen, i.e. an open air museum. They were having a medieval tournament, and there was a huge catapult. We rooted for two of those knights and they fired a huge stone ball from the catapult. I enjoyed the scene so much that I just had to stick it in one of my fairy tales. Such things tend to eventually come together into a story. The vodyanoy is constantly telling anecdotes, as the

Czechs are prone to do. There are a couple of excursions, and each can be thought of as a separate little story. The texts contain many things that are, at least in my mind, very clearly connected to a certain thing in reality, for example Šiška with the Koseze Pond, which appears in the story. I live nearby.

*Are there any political allusions to certain nitwits of our present time?*

If readers are able to find them, then I guess they're there. Not always intentionally.

*As the book was published in the previous year, you're sure to have received responses from schools, libraries, meetings with readers?*

I haven't been visiting schools or any other places much because my job requires me to spend most of my time in Klagenfurt. But on the few occasions that there had been, I noticed that some texts were used as motivation for children to write their own pieces. At one school, the children thus figured out the *Bananas and Papayas* story, i.e. that the story was written using no other vowels than a's. And so they tried to write stories with only e's, i's, o's. I find this very creative. After all, Raymond Queneau has his *Exercises in Style*, and Balog has his *Little People*.

*There's a lot of music in your fairy tales, and you use tiny discarded things to create big stories.*

Yes, everything is full of music, there are opera singers singing, double bass players performing, I've noticed it. And regarding the ordinary objects, I don't know, at one time I was translating Vasko Popa, a Serbian poet whose first book of poetry featured a very unusual poetic inventory: an ashtray, moss, etc. I have a feeling that the text sometimes goes over my head, over what I'm trying to write; that's what I feel like sometimes when I'm writing, that the words are writing themselves. Not everything is thought out in advance, you simply get into a certain mood and things come together. If you're happy with the result, you keep it, if not, you throw it out.

*The hippos in your book Hippopotamus Wisdom, with their calmness and peacefulness, came across as zen-like, which was quite unusual for Slovenian literature ...*

In a safari zoo by Lake Garda, I once saw two hippos running. I'd never outrun them, I'm sure. But they were extremely likeable. What I wanted to do with the book, then, was to have them talking all the time, for them to have all the time in the world. I feel a lot of our communication is carried out by computer or by phone, and I think it's important to sit down and have coffee with people.

*Working as a Professor at the Klagenfurt University, can you simply write because you're compelled to, can you make time for it?*

It's an enormous luxury. Yes, I feel compelled to write, though I also often have doubts about it, what with all the things that are being published. However, I'm never under any pressure, I have no deadlines to meet, I don't have to worry about subsisting on writing alone. I'm free to choose my own subjects and I don't have to pay attention to any pressing issues. I simply write, and if things get published, that's great, whether now or in three years; and if they don't get published, that's okay as well. As I said, it's a luxury.

IV) Svetina, Peter, Rokavec, Živa: "Na Slovenskem je v ospredju problemska literatura, manj je žanrske" / "In Slovenia, the Focus is on Problem Literature, not on Genres". Dnevnik, 7. 8. 2013 (2013).

*A talk with Peter Svetina about his literary work and the developments in young adult literature that he follows not only as an author but also as a literary scientist, and about how he almost became a doctor and why he changed his mind.*

*Before Peter Svetina, author and lecturer of Slovenian Language at the Klagenfurt University, decided to study at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana, where he graduated in Slovenian Language and obtained a master's and later a doctorate in old Slovenian poetry, he was a student of the Faculty of Medicine. However, as he was much better at learning the lines of the Baptism at Savica than he was at studying human anatomy, he returned to the path that he had planned as early as in his third year of high school.*

*"It seems I was more interested in literature after all," says Svetina, author of numerous books for children and young adults, among which Hippopotamus Wisdom boasts a Golden Pear Award for Most Original Slovenian Children's Fiction Book in 2011. Svetina, who draws inspiration from minor and major everyday events, says that he gets most of his creative work done while travelling and that he constantly has to balance his teaching work and writing. "There are times when I have to devote myself to my lectures and articles, and times where I don't have to be as focused."*

*Where do you get your inspiration for writing?*

It all usually happens in passing. I'm sitting in front of the school, waiting for Klara to return from piano lessons, and watching a nimble kid doing cartwheels and forward rolls on the grass by the pond. He's obviously waiting for one of his parents and it's obvious that this is the sport he's practicing, so why waste time. And so, sitting and watching becomes a "Homework on One's Own Self". Just an example. There are tons of other such details. My eyes and ears are not always tuned in such a way as to notice them. But if I do, there goes another homework.

*When did you decide that literary waters would probably suit you better than medical ones?*

When my brother told me not to ruin my health because of my studies. My brother is a psychologist, and I tend to do what he says. I studied (for example, anatomy) and studied three times more than my colleagues, and I still flunked the first time on all my exams. And I said to myself: there's something wrong either with my memory or with my motivation. I took the *Baptism at Savica*, read it and knew the "Introduction" by heart after 20 minutes. And so I saw there was nothing wrong with my memory; it had been motivation all along. So I transferred to Slovenian Language, which I'd been telling everyone I'd study all the way back in third year of high school. It seems I was more interested in literature after all.

*Did your time as a medical student influence your current writing?*

The influence of my studies was that I included a medical student in my short novel *Cicadas Go Silent at Midnight*. And that I knew how to consult an internal medicine textbook for the symptoms of his illness. However, an anaesthetist colleague later told me that she hasn't heard of any cases where the illness had taken the course I'd given it in my book. But she also said that there are many things she's never heard of.

*How do you coordinate your professional life of a lecturer in Klagenfurt with writing children's literature? Is it difficult?*

I sometimes coordinate my job as a lecturer at the Klagenfurt University and my writing literally on the go. Here I am, driving from Ljubljana to Klagenfurt and back from Klagenfurt to Ljubljana...and thinking about things on my way. I sometimes make multiple stops in order to jot something down in a notebook that I usually carry with me. Other than that, it's usually like this: there are times that I have to dedicate myself to my lectures and articles, and times when I don't have to be as focused. The latter time is when I sometimes get a relaxed afternoon, a calm evening, and the ideas, both those in my head and those in my notebook, come together in a story or poem.

*You are also an author of academic articles on old children's literature. How has Slovenian children's literature developed? What are the principal changes that it had gone through?*

I'm currently preparing to write an article about the settings of Slovenian children's literature in the past hundred years. I've selected texts that more or less obviously feature Ljubljana. And one can see that in the mid-1960s unambiguous setting markers, such as street names, start to disappear. And that immediately after World War II, the school became one of the main settings of Slovenian children's fiction. Go figure. I have until the end of the month to do so.

*Is there enough literature in Slovenian available to children and young adults nowadays?*

I believe children have to read good books, as well as bad ones, so as to hone their taste. There's plenty of both. However, the good ones are usually not as loud, and they tend to be harder to find.

*Are the trends in children's and young adult literature in Slovenia different from those abroad, e.g. in Austria?*

What I'd noticed but never actually verified in depth is that in Slovenia, the focus is on so-called problem literature, not on genres (history novels, adventure, etc.). I find the latter much more common in the German-speaking world. Children's poetry is uncommon both here and there, though I have a feeling that there's a bit more of it in Slovenia.

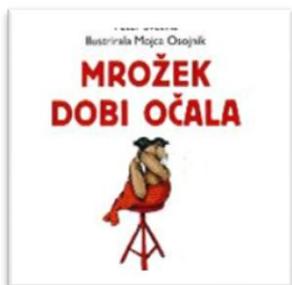
*Do you think children still like to read?*

We have two children right here at home. One reads when reading is required of them. The other reads on their own account, all the time, so it's sometimes necessary to require the opposite. I think they're a good reflection of the situation in general.

*Can young readers anticipate any new books with your name under them?*

*Homework* is waiting at Mladinska knjiga publishing house, and there are some other odds and ends. I have no idea whether they'll be going to the printer's anytime soon.

## 5 List of awards and other distinctions



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Mojca Osojnik: *Mrožek dobi očala/The Little Walrus Gets Glasses*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2003.**

2004: Nomination for the Večernica Award



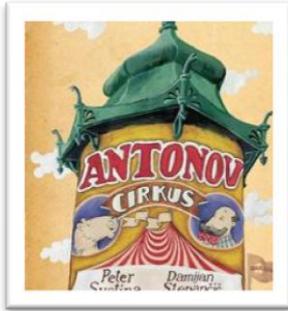
**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Klobuk gospoda Konstantina/Mr. Constantine's Hat*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2007.**

2007: Best Designed Book Award, Slovenian Book Fair

2008: Award for an original Slovenian Picture Book

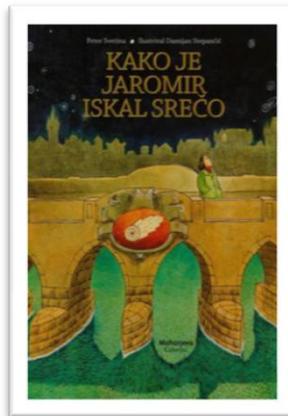
### ***Statement of the jury:***

*A genuine urban fairy tale, nicely rounded, humorous, probably intended for everybody, young and old – the story has a good point, i.e. that things always end as they should, as even nature makes sure beautiful stories of kindness have a happy ending.*



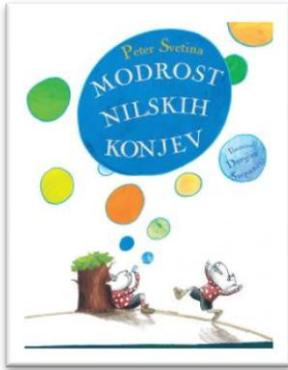
**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič. Translation Erica Johnson Debeljak: *Antonov Cirkus/Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008.**

2008: Most Beautiful Slovenian Book in the Literature and Books for Children & Youth category



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Kako je Jaromir iskal srečo/How Jaromir was Searching for his Happiness*, Mohorjeva, Celovec, 2010.**

2011: Nomination for Kristina Brenkova Award



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Modrost nilskih konjev/Hippopotamus Wisdom*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2010, 2015, 2016.**

2011: Nomination for the Večernica Award

2011: The Golden Pear Award for Best Original Slovenian Children's Book

***Statement of the jury:***

*The finest Slovenian storytelling, including stories intended for children and young people, often flirts with poetry. And so the heartbeat of the 21 short stories from this year's winner according to the Pionirska Library, with its rhythms and melodic sentences, also sounds like poetry, as Peter Svetina peppers his whimsical series of texts with recognizable literary "dances," such as the children's counting rhyme in "Twelve Penguins", the wisdom of programmatic poetry in "The Thoughts of the Philosopher Python", the onomatopoeia in "Silence", the free sound in "The Downpour", and the wordplay in "The Cold".*

*The central role in this fantasy setting is played by all-encompassing wisdom, in this case represented by hippos and other animals from all around the world. These inimitable characters showcase common and uncommon human traits that come together either in thoughtful reflection or a funny twist at the end of each story.*

*The author's dense vocabulary and the illustrator's expressive and characteristic drawings color these tales with optimism, naïve comedy, and clever oxymorons that show how to make something beautiful out of nothing: how to make a bouquet of nothing but rhymes, measure the breadth of summer, listen to silence, count imaginary penguins, and do the most important thing in the whole world: talk to each other.*

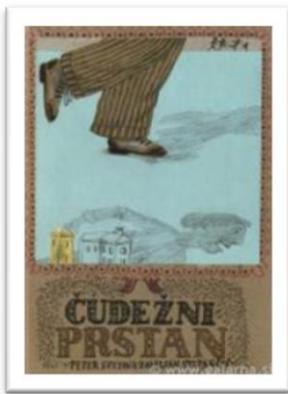
*While Slovenian children's and young adult literature in 2010 mostly excels in the illustration aspect, editor Breda Rajar at DZS has managed to publish a book whose wisdom and kindness put it among the finest children's prose in Slovenian and promises to keep it there indefinitely.*

2011: Listed in the White Ravens Catalogue

***Statement from the White Ravens Catalogue:***

*How do you measure a summer's length? How to best explain the rainy season? What are the appropriate manners when meeting a kangaroo? How do you fill a skunk's garden with*

water? Marcel and Hubert, two hippos who love to sit under the sycamore tree and ponder while they throw mud balls into the river, have a ready solution for every problem - be it constructing a tape measure, using onomatopoeia, behaving correctly, or creating flood waves. In entertaining, partly absurd episodes, Peter Svetina has the sedate, and slightly clumsy and slowcoachy protagonists transform into helpers and world-explainers without them even realising it. And because Marcel and Hubert often take things literally, their stories are great fun to read.



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: Čudežni prstan/Magic Ring, KUD Sodobnost International, 2011.**

2011: The Most Beautiful Slovenian Picture-book of the Year

**Statement of the jury:**

*In this picture book, too, just as in his own original picture book without text Zgodba o sidru/Story of an Anchor, the illustrator devotes his creative attention to the Slovene capital, Ljubljana. This time the novelty is the graphic post-modernism. Metaphysical and nostalgic whiffs of bourgeois Ljubljana from the beginning of the 20th century can be felt. The boundaries of time are blurred and give the impressions of timelessness; it seems in fact as if the layers of time are laid one on top of another, with the presentation of subjects/objects from the past as symbols of time (Edvard Rusjan's airplane, a balloon, zeppelin, dragon, etc.). The airplane or aircraft can also be understood as a leitmotif, which leads us through the story. The exterior often appears in the interior and sections are reminiscent of a Japanese woodcut, which is not surprising, since the Secession was also modelled on the Japanese; on careful observation, the illustrations are reminiscent of the famous French painter, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. We find the psychedelic, unusual machines in the sky, an atmosphere such as in the futuristic silent cult film Metropolis by Fritz Lang, a futuristic view of a large city, a new unusual depiction of Ljubljana.*

2012: The Hinko Smrekar Award for Illustrations

2012: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

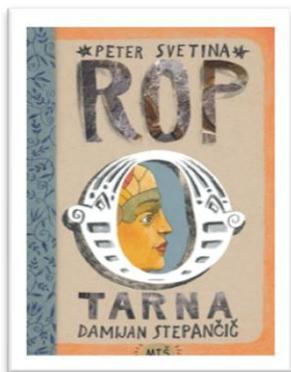
**Statement of the jury:**

*This is a story about the loneliness of an opera singer, Ljudmila Krasinc, and the magical powers that are supposedly hidden in a miraculous ring. The several times awarded author Peter Svetina is a master of refined humour, which does not function »at face value« and the amazing miracle is wittily realised in the »Ljubljana marathon«, in a mass competition that unfurls through the streets of Ljubljana. The humour intensifies and, because of following the ring, a growing number of competitors combine and link the inhabitants of old Ljubljana, which witches try to capture although they are the ones because of which the whole thing is taking place. The picture book is distinguished by witty exaggeration and an exciting intensification of the narrative, which is also outstandingly supported in the illustrations. These are polished to masterly excellence. They function in an antiquarian manner but timelessly: this timelessness is connected in the illustrator's story with the symbols of Ljubljana, with the Ljubljana dragon, city hall, Robbo's fountain, details of well-known Ljubljana buildings can be recognised etc. The excellent cooperation of two already well trained artists brings a clear ethical message on cooperation and solidarity, which is stressed for us together with the welcome humour.*

2013: Listed in the White Ravens Catalogue

**Statement from the White Ravens Catalogue:**

*Never change a winning team: Peter Svetina and Damijan Stepančič were awarded a prize for their book *Modrost nilskih konjev* (DZS publishing house, Slovenia) in 2010 and have now completed another successful co-production. In this story, a ring with supposed magical powers rolls away from an opera diva, and half the city joins in her hunt. In the end the ring falls irrecoverably into the river. It did reveal some of its power, however: the lonely singer has made some friends along the way. Svetina brings the fairytale-like story to life with a refreshing concreteness, by giving the singer a name and setting the story in Ljubljana. Stepančič's understated illustrations (coloured pencil on brown paper) lure one into the Jugendstil era, allowing the bohemians to elegantly stroll about. (Age: 2+)*



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Ropotarna/The Lumber Room*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2012.**

2013: Večernica Award

***Statement of the jury:***

*The Lumber Room is an organized jumble of little treasures that patiently wait for the reader to find them and dust them off. The author deftly sails between prose and poetry, between the conscious and the subconscious, creating playful waves full of rhetorical devices whose dynamics carry the reader from the real to the irrational, from the possible to nonsense, etc. A walk through Svetina's The Lumber Room leads to creative reading full of elusive twists and turns.*

2013: Golden Pear Award for Best Original Slovenian Children's Book of Fiction

***Statement of the jury:***

*The title of the unusual collection of texts in varying literary and visual forms, The Lumber Room, indicates that this is not just any old "repository of obsolete, useless things," but rather, in the context of individual stories, a place, a temple of things without any labels indicating their usefulness.*

*And not only that; in The Lumber Room, even order comes without labels and is thus wholly available to explorers young and old. A look inside the lumber room offers a warning as well: through a window, the O-shaped porthole on the cover, passers-by can see the interior of the book, as well as the interior of a head inhabited by thoughts.*

*The Lumber Room's poems and stories are thus associated with imagination and feelings. Using universal experiences, fears and courage, the author speaks to us as his friends who would never harm anybody, as people who respect and sometimes take comfort in things and other people around them.*

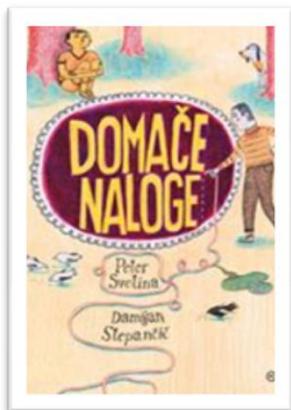
*The publisher, Miš, and both authors were clearly up to the challenge, giving us an original, imaginative book and receiving the Golden Pear Award.*

## 2016: IBBY Honor list

### **Statement of the jury:**

*This is a special book. The title, The Lumber Room, says that it is a store for “old, useless things”; the view of the lumber room is also indicative: a window, a large line in the letter “o” on the cover, through which passers-by can see the interior of the book: the interior of a head in which thought lives! In a single volume, the author has combined long and short tales, tales about people and tales about objects, poems and diminutive texts playing with language, some of them bordering on nonsense. Various literary genres and forms follow each other in an intentionally untamed order and rhythm, entirely breaking the expected horizon: each (next) page is a complete surprise. After the suspenseful events of a longer story, the reader is given a breather with a poem, a moment later is laughing at the author's trademark humor or simply marveling at the sound of the language and the acrobatics with words. The illustrator also follows this relaxed attitude. In addition to the normal index, which follows 12 stories and 9 poems, two material indexes are added at the end, subject and name inventories of everything that the lumber room offers the readers' fancy. The book received the Golden Pear Award 2013 for the best Slovenian book for young people and the Večernica Award.*

2018: On the list of books recommended by the 2018 Hans Christian Andersen Award Jury (<http://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/awards/hans-christian-andersen-awards/hcaa-2018/the-jury-recommends/>)



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Domače naloge/Homeworks*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2014.**

2015: Nomination for Večernica Award

2015: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

2015: New Paths Award

***Statement of the jury:***

*The book consists of poems whose common denominators are school and learning. However, homework isn't limited to school but understood in a broader sense, as the author also talks about personal relationships, etc. Svetina's poetic diction is hard to describe. As the reader first settles into the poetic world, a tiny sapling looking inward through the biggest, bigger or big "little window" ("Homework on Sizes") invites him to carefully reread the book; and the tiny blade of grass suddenly grows into a huge, strange tree whose branches/fingerposts point in a completely different direction. ... How is it possible for the head in the "Homework on an Empty Head" to be full of poetry? Damijan Stepančič's illustrations make it possible, and he uses such methods to deftly navigate the unique poetic landscapes of Peter Svetina. Stepančič uses visual elements to construct surprising moods that poems can settle into as if they were a comfortable armchair. It wasn't easy, but Peter Svetina and Damijan Stepančič have done their homework. At its heart, the book is an ode to language, a homework on interpersonal communication that goes beyond the technicalities – communication of all aspects of the human soul, communication between you and me and everybody.*



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Kako zorijo ježevci/The Ripening of Porcupines*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, Ljubljana, 2015, 2017.:**

2016: Večernica Award

***Statement of the jury:***

*The Ripening of Porcupines (Miš, 2015) by Peter Svetina is an excellent collection of nonsense animal stories dominated by witty linguistic and representative notions and playful twists and turns. What is unusual about such poetics, however, is that in Svetina's case laughter is intertwined with an attentive and deliberate feel for the sound and meaning of the words. It is as if the words freed themselves of their everyday meaning and, like any of the fragile creatures from these stories, taken on new, exciting, and inspiring lives.*

*The book is built upon nonsense, which is found both at the language and story levels. The former manifests itself in the literal interpretation of common phrases and in repetition that simultaneously make words senseless and imbue them with new meaning. For example, 'could also be the possum traffic officer Ferdinand, or traffic officer Ferdinand the Possum, or Ferdinand the Possum Traffic Officer'. The latter type of nonsense manifests itself in lists, repetitions and hyperbole, e.g. in "A Bus Stop in Twelve Parts". All these elements come together in an intriguing "opposite world" that continuously throws the reader off balance and underlines the living, surprising, even challenging nature of language itself. The self-sufficient joy of creating new words and combining them in a pastiche of nonsense is logical, internally consistent, and intertextual, containing numerous quotes from and references to other works, e.g. to songs like "Kekčeva pesem" or "Dan ljubezni", and to characters from other children's books. Alongside the unusual protagonists – possum, porcupine, zubr, ermine, nutria – that in themselves arouse the reader's curiosity, the most significant feature of the book is its veiled and unobtrusive message to the readers that it is important to give others a visit from time to time, to be someone's lighthouse, to dare to be fearsome like Genadij the Cricket, and most importantly, to ask important questions: How to train a shadow? How to paint the wind? What is it like to be inside music like an ant inside a clarinet?*

*We congratulate the author for the award and wish him all the best if he ever meets Genadij. There will always be porcupines ripe enough to help him reach the 33rd floor and visit the two lilac sloths.*



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Kristina Krhin: *Sredi sreče in v četrtek zjutraj/On Wisdom at Noon and on Thursday Morning*, KUD Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2015.**

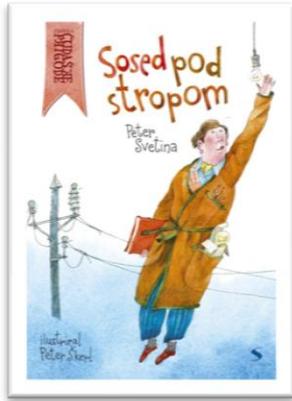
2016: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Ana Razpotnik Donati: *Kako je gospod Feliks tekmoval s kolesom/How Mr. Felix Took Part in a Bicycle Race*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2016, 2017.**

2016: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

2017: Chosen for a gift book presented to every child entering the primary school by the Reading Badge Association



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Sosed pod stropom/My Neighbour Up There*, KUD Sodobnost, Ljubljana, 2016.**

2017: Nomination for the Večernica Award



**Peter Svetina, Illustrations Ana Zavadlav: *Molitvice s stopnic/Prayers from the Stairs*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2016.**

2017: Levstikova Award

***Statement of the jury:***

*The poetry book Prayers from the Stairs consists of seven poems – little prayers said by a child, connected primarily to the child’s loved ones and borne out of concrete circumstances (a grandfather whose eyesight is getting worse, a concern that a cat is cold, anxiety before a piano recital, etc.). These prayers don’t follow any established patterns and do not concern themselves with rhyming; they’re vital and genuine. As well as gentle and warm, though they can hurt as well. In these poems, the child initiates a dialogue with an angel or with God, a dialogue that’s characterized by a charming combination of doubt/questioning and faith/trust. In Peter Svetina’s prayers, the reader can truly feel the power of a child’s wishes, seeing what’s truly important for the child, what’s running through her head, what she fears and what she worries about. The tiny verses are thus extremely touching, which would have been hard for the author to achieve if he didn’t have great insight into the child’s mind and soul. Some of the wishes are relatively simple, almost trivial, while others are far from it; Svetina is able to fill a seemingly simple poem with extremely heavy and complex topics, such as the unfulfilled desire to have a baby in “A Visiting Prayer”. This is what makes these poems multi-dimensional and ultimately interesting for adult readers as well: through them,*

*adults get acquainted with children and their world, while children get acquainted with poetry. What more could you ask for in a book of poetry? Very little. Prayers from the Stairs may be a tiny book with only a couple of poems (accompanied by illustrations by Ana Zavadlav that create a convincing, tangible atmosphere), but these are telling, intense and powerful, certain to leave a mark on the readers or nudge them towards a better understanding of the (child's) world and themselves in it or towards a more fluent reading of poetry. We're not only faced with Svetina's finest collection of children's poetry to date – the book is also the perfect embodiment of the Čebelica series – it's tiny, but great.*

## 2017: Večernica Award

### **Statement of the jury:**

*Prayers from the Stairs is a wonderful book of poetry, extraordinarily genuine and convincing thanks to its minimalist expression (which can also be encountered in some other works by Peter Svetina – including those based on the poetics of nonsense) that communicates not only what is being said but also, and perhaps primarily, what is left unsaid and transcendent. The poems are based on a child's perspective that is seemingly naïve and simple but in truth profoundly wise: even God and the angel, the main persons addressed and solicited by the child that is the lyric subject of these poems, are child-like, presented in a thoroughly human manner, as they can almost be chatted with and are almost part of the large family that includes a short-sighted grandfather, a shivering cat, an aunt who can't have children, and the intelligent but scared and lonely child.*

*The themes explored in the collection, as well as the fact that it includes religious subjects and motifs, could have easily resulted in an idealized or preachy presentation of "prayers" spoken by a perfect child, however, Peter Svetina always manages to avoid this: in her solicitations and his sadness and love for everything that exists, the child remains naïve; these are also the tones of Svetina's language, which approaches Dane Zajc's poetics of "silence", concealment, of merely pointing at that which cannot be expressed ... Prayers from the Stairs are thus without doubt one of the most important poetry books in contemporary Slovenian children's poetry – their marvelousness, together with the illustrations, provides an immediate and unforgettable and staggering reading experience.*

## 6 Complete bibliography

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Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Kako zorijo ježevci/The Ripening of Porcupines*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, Ljubljana, 2015, 2017.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Domače naloge/Homeworks*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2014.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Mojca Osojnik: *Mrožek, mrožek/Walrus, Walrus*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2013.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Ropotarna/The Lumber Room*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2012.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Čudežni prstan/Magic Ring*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2011.

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Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič. Translation Erica Johnson Debeljak: *Antonov Cirkus/Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008.

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Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič. Translation Mara Gredzena: *Brinumu gredzens* (original title: *Čudežni prstan/Magic Ring*), Liels un Mazs, Riga, 2018, Latvian translation.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič. Translation Barbara Pregelj: *El anillo mágico* (original title: *Čudežni prstan/Magic Ring*), Malinc, Medvode, 2017, Spanish translation.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič, Translation Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka: *Cyrk Antoniego* (original title: *Antonov cirkus/Anton's Circus*), Agencja Edytorska Ezop, Warszawa, 2015, Polish translation.

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Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič, Translation Erica Johnson Debeljak: *Antonov cirkus = Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008, English translation.

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## 8 Ten of the most important titles by the candidate and the names of the publishers of all editions.

1. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Uho sveta/The Ear of the World*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2017.
2. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Ana Zavadlav: *Molitvice s stopnic/Prayers from the Stairs*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2016.
3. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Sosed pod stropom/My Neighbour Up There*, KUD Sodobnost, Ljubljana, 2016.
4. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Kako zorijo ježevci/The Ripening of Porcupines*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, Ljubljana, 2015, 2017.
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6. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Ropotarna/The Lumber Room*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2012.
7. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Modrost nilskih konjev/Hippopotamus Wisdom*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2010.
8. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Antonov Cirkus/Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008; Agencja Edytorska

- Ezop, Warszawa, 2015 (Polish translation: Translation Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka: *Cyrk Antoniego*).
9. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Klobuk gospoda Konstantina/Mr. Constantine's Hat*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2007; Drava, Klagenfurt, 2008 (German translation: Translation Fabjan Hafner: *Der Hut der Hern Konstantin = Klobuk gospoda Konstantina*).
  10. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Mojca Osojnik: *O mrožku, ki si ni hotel striči nohtov/About the Little Walrus who Refused to Cut his Nails*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 1999; Hangilsa, Payu-si, Gyeonggi-do, 2005 (Korean translation: Translation Kim Yeongseon: *Bada kokkirineun sontop kkakkiga siltaeyo*); Drava, Klagenfurt, 2006 (German translation: Translation Fabjan Hafner: *Das kleine Walross lässt sich nicht die Nägel schneiden = O mrožku, ki si ni hotel striči nohtov*)

## 9 List of the five books sent to the jurors

1. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Ana Zavadlav: *Molitvice s stopnic/Prayers from the Stairs*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2016.
2. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Sosed pod stropom/My Neighbour Up There*, KUD Sodobnost, Ljubljana, 2016.
3. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Ropotarna/The Lumber Room*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2012.
4. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Modrost nilskih konjev/Hippopotamus Wisdom*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2010.
5. Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Antonov Cirkus/Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008.

## 10 Published reviews of the books submitted to the jury

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Ana Zavadlav: *Molitvice s stopnic/Prayers from the Stairs*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana, 2016.

***Bilban, Tina: Short annotation in: "Odklenjeni kriki: Priročnik za branje kakovostnih mladinskih knjig 2017"/"Screams unlocked: The Manual for Reading Quality Children's Literature" (editors: Darja Lavrenčič Vrabec, Ida Mlakar Črnič), Mestna knjižnica Ljubljana, Ljubljana 2017.***

The book of poems/prayers is addressed primarily to younger, pre-school children with questions about the nature of the world, about the adult world and about everything that hasn't yet become self-evident for them thanks to their youthful curiosity. In his characteristic style, Svetina shines a light on the magic of our everyday lives, though he – in light of the

target audience and the subject of the book – moves away from the poetics of nonsense that characterize e.g. his *Homework*, creating instead a series of realistic poems with a solid structure. The poems are conceived as a poetic dialogue between the child and God; however, the latter doesn't play the role of the unreachable holy, instead being questioned by the child like the rest of the world. In some of the poems, God's place is taken by an angel, who is closer to the child, addressed more directly and with fewer questions. This is a book that touches upon what's holy but deals primarily with the marvelousness of our everyday lives and with the wonders of the world of a child. Such an attitude towards the world is also captured in the warm, multi-layered illustrations.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Peter Škerl: *Sosed pod stropom/My Neighbour Up There*, KUD Sodobnost, Ljubljana, 2016.

***Bilban, Tina: Short annotation in: "Odklenjeni kriki: Priročnik za branje kakovostnih mladinskih knjig 2017"/"Screams unlocked: The Manual for Reading Quality Children's Literature" (editors: Darja Lavrenčič Vrabec, Ida Mlakar Črnič), Mestna knjižnica Ljubljana, Ljubljana 2017.***

The short story collection is characterized by the author's recognizable style, by wordplay, inventive humour, by layers of meaning and well-thought-out elements of nonsense, which combine with and enrich the stories' comedy and their many messages. At the same time, there is a certain novelty to the stories, as the animal characters from Svetina's lauded short story books *The Ripening of Porcupines* and *Hippopotamus Wisdom* have been replaced by adult weirdos, which also changed the range of the topics dealt with. The stories, whose bizarre plots often thicken and unravel because of (unrequited) love, are thus addressed to older children, though their wacky comedy and nonsense poetics, taken sometimes to the extreme, will get a laugh out of younger readers as well. As is typical of all literary classics, *My Neighbour up There* is a book that should be read again and again, in different periods of childhood, discovering new layers every time we do so. The stories are accompanied by considered, telling and appropriately wacky illustrations. With great attention to detail, as we're used to from Škerl.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Ropotarna/The Lumber Room*, Miš, Dob pri Domžalah, 2012.

***Ogrizek, Maša. "Oživljene stvari in zaljubljeni čudaki Petra Svetine."/ "Peter Svetina's Living Things and Weirdos in Love" Delo volume 55. Issue 233 (2013) p. 14***

*The Lumber Room: an award-winning patchwork of odds and ends that works as a convincing whole*

*The Lumber Room* by Peter Svetina, for which the author had recently been awarded the Večernica Award, bestowed by the *Večer* newspaper to the best original Slovenian children's

and young adult book of fiction published in the previous year, is a bricolage of different texts: short stories, poems, word puzzles, and brief exercises in style. The book doesn't try to hide that it was cobbled together from various "odds and ends" found on the floor of the author's workshop, however, it is extremely successful as a whole.

The book's title, *The Lumber Room*, alludes to its genesis in another sense of the word. With most texts in the book, we get the feeling that a fragment of reality – a banana sticker, a paper boat, a fragrant piece of soap, etc. – started a series of meaning- and sound-based associations. We can thus interpret the hole cut in the front cover of the book, through which an anatomical representation of a head can be seen, as an invitation to look inside the author's mind.

However, upon closer reading, the book reveals not only the anatomy of its creation but also the inner workings of language itself. Like a magician, Svetina pulls rhymes out of his sleeve, using nothing more than the sound of a name to bring a character to life – "There once was a Frank Gloomyrache / who couldn't stop twirling his moustache." He also shows, in a funny way, that language can sometimes be extremely economical – with words such as *to decline* and *(at)tempt* having more than one meaning – and sometimes redundant – although an umbrella does a perfectly good job of protecting us from rain, there's also the rainshade.

Svetina juxtaposes similar-sounding words for comedic effect, magically turning e.g. a hag into a bag, and obscure the meaning of the words by incorrectly grouping their syllables, e.g. "Ithas beena longtime sinceany bodysprinkled me." In a passing manner and in line with the story, Svetina also calls attention to the difference between the literal and figurative meaning of the phrases "don't take your dirty laundry outside" and "devilish."

### *Brilliant wordplay*

To some extent, Svetina's wordplay is certainly a matter of pure enjoyment, however, these "exercises in style" are usually an echo, a formal doubling of the content. For example, the stumbling speech mentioned above is the result of the fact that it's been a long time since a path has been sprinkled with salt. In some of the texts, the form and content are so intertwined that it is impossible to differentiate between them. One such case is "Oh, No, a Fairy Tale," which makes us burst into laughter with its very first line, which goes: "In Koder there once lived a fount who often brimmed the ledge in his yarn." As is customary with puzzles and crosswords, the author provides a solution, however, the solution itself is another puzzle, a mirror sentence, which can be understood if read from the back.

The first thing that one notices with *The Lumber Room* is its rejection of hierarchy. Svetina convincingly shows that virtually everything, no matter how banal, can be the subject of literature. Even literary genres in the book follow each other as equals. Different formal levels of speech are likewise never used to signify aloofness or to humiliate – they are simply there to better sketch out individual characters. In one of the short stories in the book, the vodyanoy, urged to do so by his friend, the devil, learns formal speech, only to conclude in the end that "it sounds mighty stoopid tho."

Rejection of hierarchy is also typical of Svetina's literary characters; in addition to various (living) things, *The Lumber Room* is populated by all sorts of people: from a water polo

player, a marine biologist, and a maid to a beggar, a clerk, and a conductor. The author treats them with equal respect and equal sympathies. If there's anything that slightly elevates an individual in Svetina's eyes, it's their weirdness.

In common parlance, the word "weirdo" usually has negative connotations and denotes people who are different because they refuse to behave in accordance with certain social norms. In today's deluge of sameness and uniformity, weirdos are becoming increasingly rare – and precious. Just like the seemingly worthless, but actually priceless things we find in the lumber room.

For Svetina, the word "weirdo" has an almost noble sound. And at the end of the book, the standard table of contents is accompanied by an index of weirdos. Tellingly, these include Peter Svetina, Damijan Stepančič, who illustrated the book, and editor Gaja Kos.

### *Coincidences fueled by love*

The short stories included in the book – like many other children's books by Svetina, e.g. *Mr. Constantine's Hat* and *Magic Ring* – are characterized by a serial structure of cause and effect. The initial flap of the butterfly's wings is always a tiny, unimportant event, for instance a piece of soap falling from a garden fence to the ground; however, this event sends the dominoes falling. Although it initially seems that what follows is a series of coincidences, it turns out that there was always a hidden telos for everything; and the telos is always the same: love.

Another aspect of Svetina's work that should be noted is the fact that his writing doesn't try to teach anything, which is a rarity in Slovenian children's literature. The author doesn't want to teach or educate; instead, he shows that what's sometimes needed is not a different action, but a different perspective. This is particularly evident in the poem called "Every Gentleman", in which "Every gentleman / Slurps his soup as loudly as he can / To draw attention from those / Stuffing themselves with the rest."

With such an attitude, accompanied by an animist belief in the living nature of things and by a passion for puzzles, Svetina steps into doubtlessly too small, but actually comfortable children's shoes, giving a nod to his predecessors who had done the same: one of the fairy tales in the book is thus (intertextually) visited by bandit Grdavškar, the little cousin of the bandit Ceferin.

As indicated above, Svetina's *The Lumber Room* is a convincing whole. The wonderful texts are accompanied by illustrations by Damijan Stepančič, with whom Svetina has already successfully collaborated in the past. Stepančič gives each text a singular image, further accentuating the impression of a pastiche. Like Svetina, Stepančič often creates incredible synergy between form and content; for example, the owners of the umbrella and rainshade in love are depicted in watercolors, as reflections in a puddle.

Cleverness also spills over to the back cover and to an index of all sorts of things that gives a joking nod to science books. Alongside both authors, praise should also be given to the editor and publisher for a gutsy step, which has thankfully been noted and deservedly awarded.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Modrost nilskih konjev/Hippopotamus Wisdom*, DZS, Ljubljana, 2010.

**I) Kos, Gaja. "Peter Svetina: Modrost nilskih konjev." *Sodobnost* (1963) volume 74. issue 4 (2010) pp. 582–583.**

A person who has read a book titled *Hippopotamus Wisdom* could, perhaps rightfully, be expected to provide some wisdom of their own. Thankfully, such a person can always stand up to such expectations by wisely staying silent and letting others speak for them. For example (two hippos, Hubert and Marcel, are discussing what's most important): "*Tanami the Zebra came by. She visited her friends on her way back from the store. 'What are you doing?' she asked. 'Oh, nothing,' said Marcel. 'We're just talking.' 'That's what's most important,' said Tanami and joined them.*" At least Tanami's wisdom can't be doubted ... There are heaps of stories about animals, not all of them good and even fewer of them wise. However, the twenty-one short stories included in the illustrated *Hippopotamus Wisdom* are definitely both, so it's no wonder that they reminded the present reader of the animal stories of Toon Tellegen. Anybody who has ever read anything by the Dutch master of sweet, humorous, bizarre and poetic animal philosophy miniatures will know why and how, and anybody who hasn't should do so immediately (*Mala nočna torta s plameni* (selection from Toon Tellegen's *Misschien wisten zij alles? ; Ist er dan niemand boos? ; Taartenboek*) would be a good start). But let us return to Hubert and Marcel, currently sitting in the shade of a sycamore, talking and throwing mud balls into the water.

In *Hippopotamus Wisdom* by Peter Svetina and Damijan Stepančič, we can expect to meet a variety of unusual animal characters, from hippos, pelicans, grasshoppers, camels, gnus and flies to countless others, though it's true that some are only encountered as extras. And the variety is wonderful! I'm a bit tired of all the countless bears and rabbits, often stuck in virtually identical sappy situations because of which I'm often unable, try as I may, to tell them from one another (there are exceptions, of course), and I don't think I'm the only one. On the other hand, the animals listed above live in a world where there are no people – a world that may appear foreign to us, an unfrenzied world free of hysteria and time pressure, ruled by gentle, peaceful moods in which animals have time to think, wonder, hang out, enjoy themselves, and explore various sensations. "It was already evening when Marcel arrived. Hippos are rarely in a rush." Such timelessness (but never boredom) is of course the perfect setting for questions to ripen in curious minds, questions that are often such that they could have been posed by anybody (mostly children, of course) and at any time, which may lead you to think that their answers should likewise be easy and at arm's reach. You couldn't be further from the truth. It is true, however, that given enough time, we would find them, if they didn't find us first.

All the stories in *Hippopotamus Wisdom* celebrate (and foster) that curiosity so inherent to children that often dissipates as we grow older. Adult readers of the book will enjoy the animals' peculiar logic, their brows becoming ever more furrowed as they find themselves deep in thought, their understanding of the world and their strange behaviors – never laughing at them, as silly or infantile, but with them, because everything is so imaginative,

funny, unusual and novel. As well as very foreign. Young readers, on the other hand, will certainly enjoy the book just as much, if not more, but for the opposite reason – because they'll find everything so familiar. The language of the stories is simple, sentences are short, clear, and uncluttered – this is also evident at the level of the plot – while dialogues, which are the source of a major part of the dynamism of these stories, are charmingly funny, as we've already come to expect from Svetina. In short, *Hippopotamus Wisdom* is rife with charm and positive attitude, which are completely untainted by obnoxious sappiness, and of course with the titular wisdom, which, when not explicit, is certainly always found between the lines. And that's what (good) writing is all about – communicating ideas without stating them explicitly, inspiring and making people laugh, with or without hippos.

The visualization of the large African herbivore mammals and their companions was entrusted to Damijan Stepančič, Svetina's most frequent collaborator in the past few years; let us just point out the much-praised *Anton's Circus* from two years ago. In Stepančič's illustrations, Hubert and Marcel are extremely likeable, and the drawings in general correspond well with the spirit of the stories. It is unfortunate, however, that the protagonists are sometimes located in the centre of the book, i.e. across the binding, resulting in their bodies being folded and deformed, most evidently in "How Wide Is the Summer", the second story in the book.

The two hippos can thus take their time for deep discussions or just hanging out in good company – and we should perhaps follow their example. It's sad and troubling that authors (of countless animal stories) often withhold such luxury both from themselves and from their characters who consequently become superficial, one-dimensional and clichéd, and become lost among thousands that are just like them. On the other hand, we won't soon forget about Hubert and Marcel.

***II) Katja Stergar: "Modrost nilskih konjev" In: Peter Svetina – Hippopotamus Wisdom, Short stories. Sample translation, Javna agencija za knjigo Republike Slovenije, Slovenian Book Agency, Ljubljana, 2014.***

Hubert and Marcel are hippopotamuses who do not take life as a bare fact, but come to know life, taste it, reflect on it a bit, learn about it – or perhaps not – and, last but not least, enjoy it together with their friends. Hubert and Marcel have time to listen to silence and to rhyme rhymes. They do not rush into contact with the human world, and neither do the supporting characters of these twenty-one short stories – Tanami the Zebra, Claudia the Skunk, Rudolf the Rhinoceros, pelicans, flies, penguins, and many more. Relaxation is one of the virtues of this text, and when I say relaxation, I mean both the relaxed ways of the heroes, who can forget about time altogether or can find time to fling mud balls or think about shelling peas, as well as relaxation at the linguistic level of the text. The sentences, but also individual stories as a whole, are clear and short, without any unnecessary baggage. They are full of dynamism, sometimes lyricism, while sometimes being concise, yet always full of comedy and optimism. Occasionally the author deliberately foregoes adult auto-censoring and spices up the text by depicting characters who are not always perfect role models. This not only allows children to think independently, but encourages them by making them doubt, by giving them a chance to be wise. The short stories in *Hippopotamus Wisdom* can be read as

individual chapters of a short children's novel or as standalone stories that arouse children's curiosity and make us all laugh.

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Antonov Cirkus/Anton's Circus*, Vodnikova založba, Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2008.

***Gaja Kos: "Lahko noč, pa eno bolho za pomoč"/"Good Night and Sleep Tight", in: Delo, issue 51, vol 34, Ljubljana, (2009). p. 22.***

For the second time in a row, the title of "Most Beautiful Slovenian Book" was bestowed on a picture book by Peter Svetina; two years ago, the title was given to *Mr. Constantine's Hat*, illustrated by Peter Škerl, in the "Children and Youth" category, while last year it was awarded to *Anton's Circus*, illustrated by Damijan Stepančič and designed by Sanja Janša, in the "Literature" category. Which is funny – because truth be told, if anybody had tried to convince me, before *Anton's Circus*, that a book from the Spominčice series would ever receive such an award, I'm sure I wouldn't have taken them seriously, based on what I'd previously seen.

Now, what was the source of my doubts? The visual aspect of the series, or, to be specific, its design, which is handled, as mentioned above, by Sanja Janša. Fortunately, however, it has turned out that the series, at least in this aspect, is far from uniform; the predominant vibrancy and liveliness that can sometimes drift into kitsch and motif overcrowding can apparently still be tamed into a harmonic whole, and *Anton's Circus* is the book where the designer best succeeds in doing so. Calm colors, harmony and pleasant warmth, a suitable typeface, and a balanced placing of text and illustrations that's easy on the eye certainly combine in an aesthetic whole, a beautiful book that is even better than last year's "Most Beautiful Slovenian". Compared to the other books from the Spominčice series, the awarded book also stands out with its illustrations; Stepančič's excellent drawings accompany the reader on a tour of old Ljubljana and please the attentive eye with clever details. The heroes of the book are Anton, the lion, and the fleas who perform in a circus known as the Grand Comedy of Anton Bon and Leopold the Lion. Things are going along smoothly until the fleas one day flee a new shampoo, resulting in a show that just isn't what it used to be. Anton and the lion try to figure out how to jazz up their show and eventually arrive at the idea to create a play, ... As we're used to when it comes to Svetina's works for young children, the text is imaginative and humorous; what stands out, however, are the dialogues, which are fun and entertaining. To sum up, *Anton's Circus* is a charming book in all respects, while Spominčice might become a permanent fixture on the scene, provided they proceed in the direction taken here.