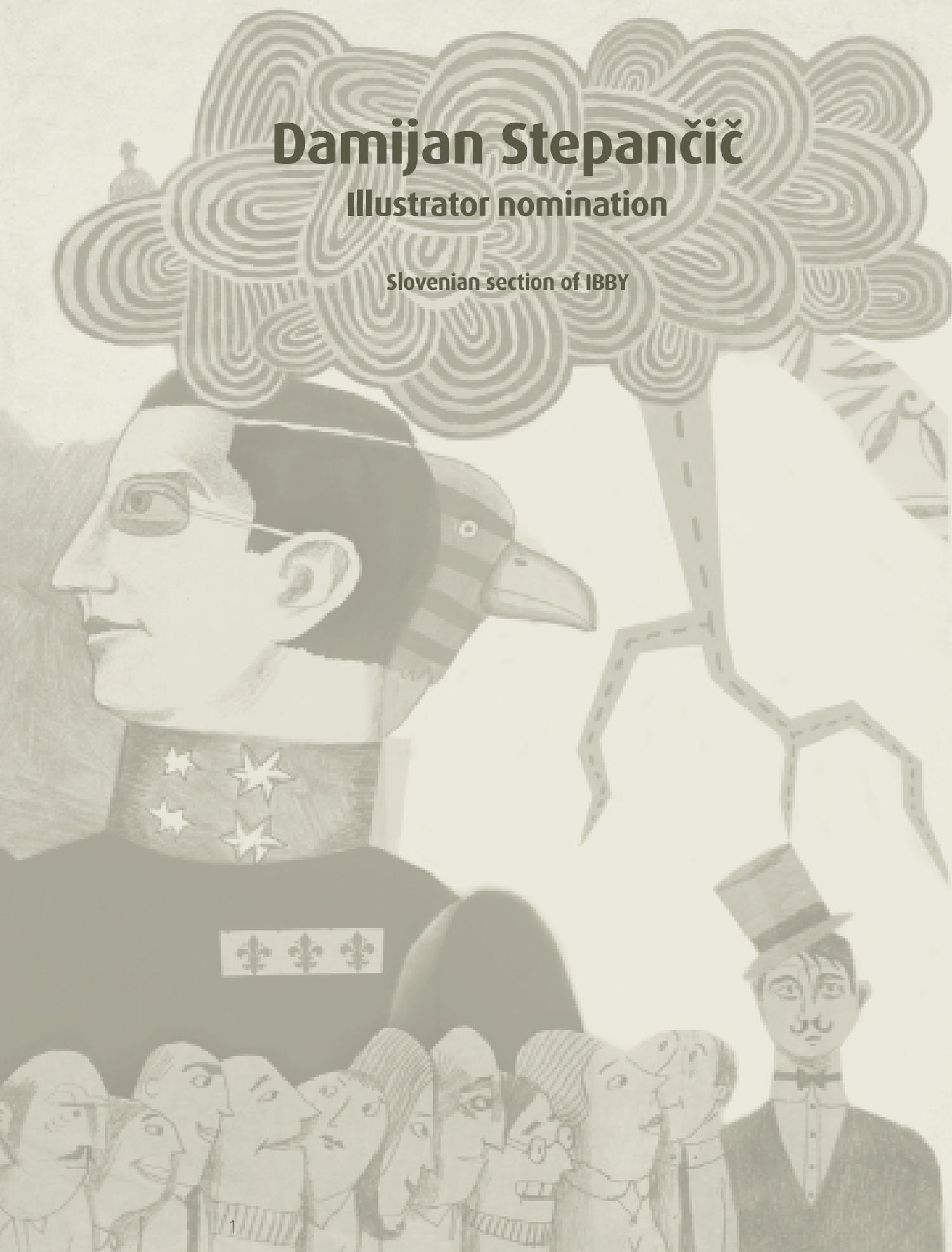


Hans Christian Andersen
Award 2022

Damijan Stepančič

Illustrator nomination

Slovenian section of IBBY



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Damijan Stepančič was born on 22 May 1969 in Ljubljana. After completing the secondary school for design and photography in Ljubljana, he continued his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, in the field of design. With the recognition that a classical approach suited him better in confronting fundamental artistic problems, he decided in 1991, after completing two years of design, to study at the Department of Painting, from which he graduated in 1996 under Prof. Gustav Gnamuš with a cycle of paintings of the four elements and Prof. Marko Uršič with a theoretical philosophical work, *Alchemists and Painters*. Since then, he has devoted himself particularly actively to illustrating books for young people. He also cooperates increasingly with the periodical press, both for the young and adult readers. In addition to painting, he cultivates other related art forms: comics, cartoons, and puppets. The expressiveness of his illustrations is clearly influenced by painting skills, from the underlying colors and composition to the size of formats, which is in line with the author's conviction that painting and illustration go hand in hand.

Stepančič is author of four books; he has so far illustrated almost a hundred books, co-created many comic books and had several independent exhibitions in the field of illustration. He has illustrated around a hundred textbooks, exercise books, handbooks for teachers, and other educational material, as well as more than 120 articles in children's magazines. In 2020, he illustrated the 2020 ICBD message *Hunger for Words*, written by Peter Svetina and sponsored by the Slovenian section of IBBY (for more information on the 2020 ICBD see: <https://www.ibby.si/index.php/icbd-2020>).

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A high-resolution portrait photograph of the candidate



3

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

Damijan Stepančič is an illustrator with a very distinctive and original style. In his work, he maintains a profound connection with the noble tradition of painting and illustration, which he knows very well, and intertwines it, sensibly and effectively, with contemporary artistic expression. He endeavours, on the one hand, to follow tradition, while exhibiting, on the other, a strong desire to reshape and re-evaluate it. The harder he tries to depart from tradition, the more he upholds it, broadening and enriching it in the process.

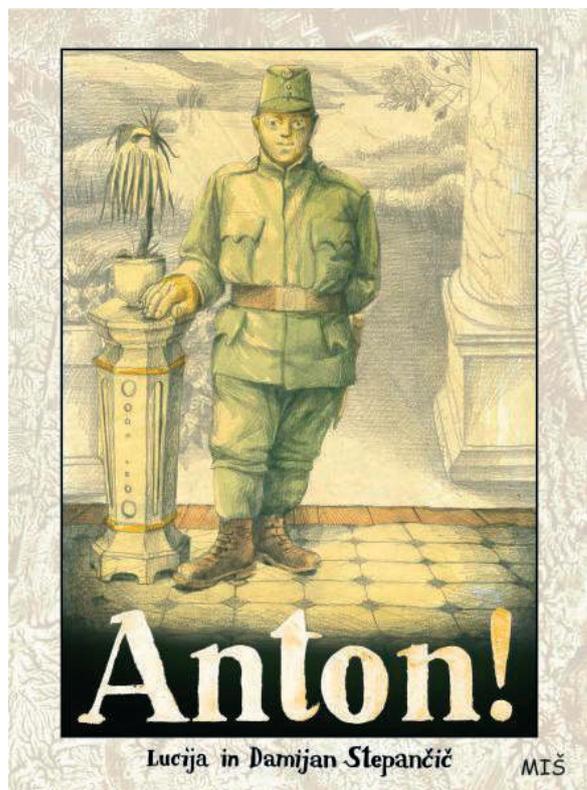
Damijan is a painter who likes to tell stories. Why do I lay such emphasis on the fact that he is a painter? Because his painterly approach provides him with a much wider range of styles and techniques. But perhaps even “painting” is not the best word to describe what Stepančič does, for he is always switching and mixing techniques. He may utilize clean, dry media, charcoal or a paintbrush. He may stick bits of paper into collages or paint in acrylics. He may even make prints. He will use whatever he finds interesting and necessary. It may seem that he switches between techniques without rhyme or reason, pursuing the whim of his inspiration, but it only appears that way on the surface. The inspiration actually lies in outlining a solid project concept. In the execution phase, it abides quietly in every atom of the image. In the end, the whole appears to have been created in one instant. Everything is fresh and brimming with intractable impulsivity.

Stepančič's greatest strengths are his (occasionally outrageous) courage and his disregard for tradition, which he deviates from consciously as if guided by the principle – the further away, the better. I once characterised him as a brazen illustrator. His compositions are bold, his segments of action unconventional. He has a tendency to pile techniques into rich palimpsestic layers, and yet the viewer never feels that it is excessive – everything serves a purpose, a purpose derived from the story, character portraits, or even the literary style of the text. Adjusting his artistic expression to the text is personal to him. He very rarely merely follows the text, preferring instead to converse with it, even polemicise it, allowing himself an ironical take on the story. He twists the text visually and fills in any gaps he sees.

He is not averse to ignoring details that strike him as redundant – he is not by any means an illustrator who merely follows and embellishes the text. Stepančič is an erudite, a mature and independent artist who never allows the text to steer his commentary on it. He is uncompromising in everything he does and approaches everything with great passion and intense creativity. That is probably the reason why he has recently been taking up so many personal projects, independent of commission. These range from bulky comic albums and wordless picture books to story books in which the writer is employed merely to help Stepančič express his idea in literary form. Projects such as these expand the field of play that enticed him to the world of illustration.

The books and comic albums that come out of these experiments are striking and unusual. He may be regarded as the *enfant terrible* of Slovenian illustration, but his stance also empowers other artists to break away from the beaten pathways and customs. The sheer size of his opus is astounding, and it hardly matters whether that is driven by his bold nonchalance, his energy and strong need for expression, or his appetite for telling stories his own way. Whatever the case may be, his creations are intense and, above all, charming artistic sensations for children as well as adults.

Pavle Učakar



Damijan Stepančič: "Nekaj razmišljanj ob ustvarjanju ilustracij za slikanico Anton!" / "Some Thoughts on Illustrating the Picture Book Anton!" *Otrok in knjiga*, issue 100, pp. 16-19, 2017.

In the following couple of paragraphs, I would like to share with some of the thoughts that occurred to me as I was planning and executing the illustrations as one half of the creative tandem behind the picture book *Anton!* (Miš, 2014).

Visiting various book fairs almost every year, I found that anniversaries, personal and others, offer a great opportunity to direct the readers' attention to whatever is being celebrated or remembered. At first, I was a bit suspicious of the practice, as in, why should we wait for an anniversary if a certain event or person has a good enough story?

However, as the anniversary of World War I is a centenary, my doubts dissipate. In this case, I feel that the higher the anniversary, the greater the impact of the event itself.

Already as a young boy I heard a story, told to me by my uncle, about his father, i.e. my grandfather – about an unusual experience of his in World War I. At the time, I didn't find the story particularly special, but children spend half of their lives in another world anyway. How-

ever, it was apparently interesting enough that I committed it to memory. And as I grew older and started devoting more and more of my time to books, the story again floated up to the surface. But it was when I shared my idea of illustrating this story with my family and with editors at the Miš publishing house, which would later publish the book, that the material really started to take shape.

I knew exactly what I wanted and how the whole thing should look from the very beginning.

It was critical to me for the story to present the war and my grandfather's miracle in an authentic, serious manner. I didn't want to diminish the drama of the war or gloss over it, I didn't want to create a picture book about the war, but rather about the soldiers, individuals with their names and fates, regardless of the side that they were fighting for. I wanted to show the tragedy of war through a personal story, that is, the story of my grandfather. I was worried that if I did things differently, the book might turn out preachy or scholastic. I wanted readers to encounter a personal war experience and through it to come to understand the senselessness, the suffering and the loss of loved ones. I believe that's the only way for one to actually feel the gravity and tragedy of war.

I started creating the illustrations with all seriousness. I knew I had much to learn about the war if I wanted them to be authentic and convincing. I started by visiting local museums with exhibits related to World War I. I found it interesting that their owners and curators were extremely committed, much more than I'd have expected of them, especially since they're working in a field where nothing new has happened for the past century. Their energy and enthusiasm proved incredibly contagious. Their commitment and readiness to share information about the war told me something very important: that we should never forget the horrors of World War I, particularly because of those who died in it or who had gone missing and remain nameless.

This message had a great effect on me, I felt a personal responsibility, even a need, to speak about these people with no names in a picture book. Not just at conferences, round table discussions, exhibitions, memorial openings, etc. While I don't underestimate manifestations

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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

such as these, or their honesty, I feel they lack a personal commitment. And that's what was always on my mind: how can I personally repay or honour the memory of the fallen. As you look at photos and read the soldiers' diaries and letters, they come alive in your mind's eye, you get the feeling that you could run into these guys on the street as they're eyeing girls ... Unintentionally and unconsciously, you become a part of them, you peek into their youth and they become a part of you. In another world and in another time, you could be friends.

At the same time, I was well aware that talking about war – illustrating war – would be hard work, and that the result would not be particularly popular, would not garner reviews nor find itself at the top of library lists or whatever.

Through my visits to museums and conversations with people, and particularly in my discussions with Lucija (who wrote the text for the book), a concept for the picture book gradually developed. We wanted it to start with the general, external aspects of the war, with historical facts, and then gradually become more personal, intimate.

At the beginning of the book, the illustrations and the text thus outline the environment and its circumstances, the characters and their tragedies, without getting particularly personal. The perspective moves from the trenches to an assault and artillery fire, then to a guard in front of a cave shelter in a quiet winter night. This introductory part is also supported very well by the text, which is extremely clear and concise and doesn't replicate the illustrations. The reader is informed only about the things necessary for the story, and the combination of text and illustration foreshadows the development and the finale that is to occur in the final part of the picture book.



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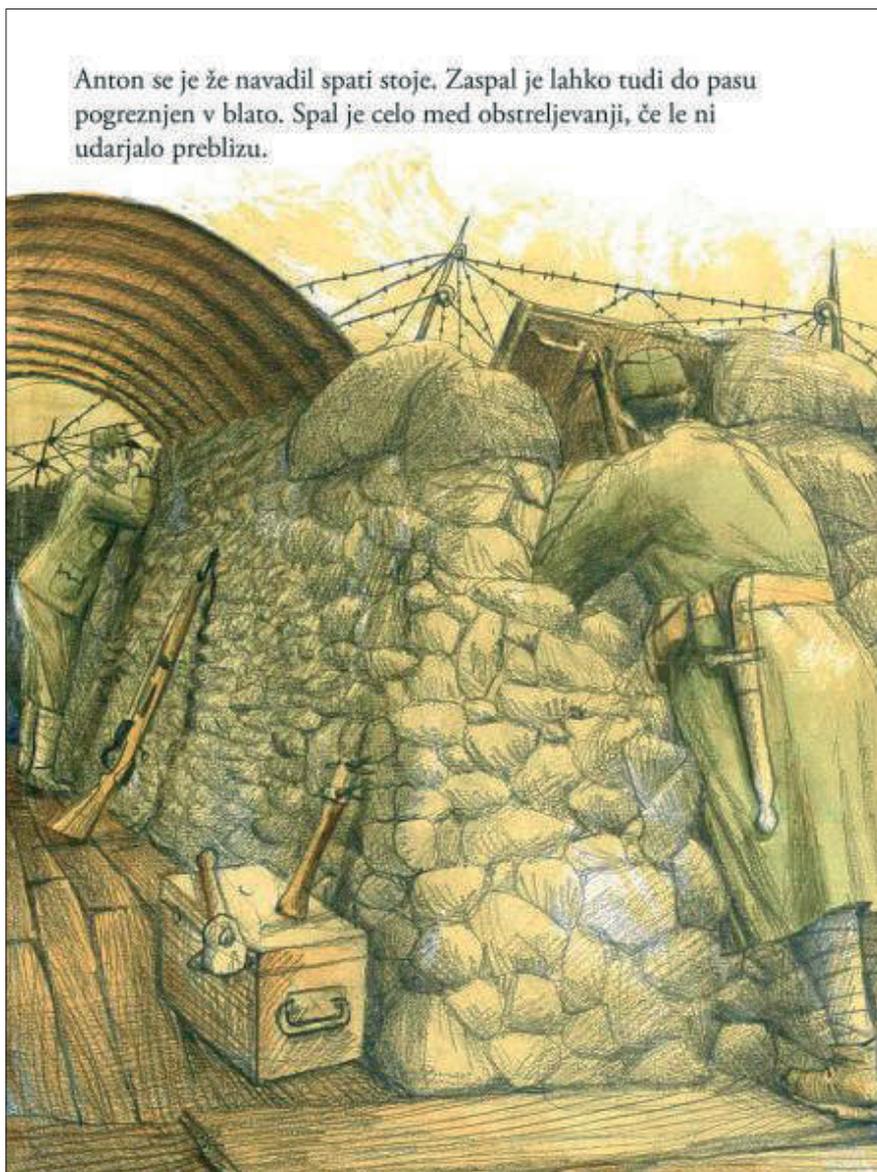
One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

We are like ghosts, able to walk around the landscape without being noticed.

In order to be able to conjure up the atmosphere of the war, I searched out photos from the frontlines. I also took photos of uniforms, weapons, battle positions, cemeteries, i.e. everything that could come in handy, then made and kept copies of them. I traced the uniforms, assembled different shots into different sequences, directed scenes and composed the illustrations in such a way as to make them as telling and suggestive as possible. Illustrations must be immersive, they must take the reader into the heart of what's happening; even if they didn't read the text, the reader should be able to follow the story without a problem.

The reader is a silent observer. With some books, I get the feeling as if the authors are being too gentle with their readers, rocking them to sleep and trying to render them passive. I was aiming for the exact opposite: to cast the reader into the events (as young men were cast into the cruelties of war), bring them face to face with their own vulnerability, reduce them to their survival instinct.

To achieve this, most of the scenes I illustrated don't take place indoors, but rather in close contact with the protagonists, e.g. with a gunner grimacing in the moment of the thunderous blast of his 305 mm cannon as Italians are mounting an assault against Austrians, etc.



The location is always illustrated and even extends outside of the borders of the illustration, we are never left hanging in an abstract non-place. The only exception to this is the military cemetery scene, where the perspective is raised above the landscape, as if it's only our bodies that are buried, while our souls are elsewhere ... Our gaze is always met by something, be it a wall, a soldier's head, a cannon, etc. Even explosions are drawn tangibly, as a thing you can touch or walk through, and in their steadfastness and physicality seem even more present and terrifying, as if they would never move or dissipate. Like a nightmare that sticks to us and refuses to be shaken off. We can thus experience the feeling of living in cave shelters, in trenches where the soldiers were confined and packed tight, not to even mention the wounded, the rats, the decaying bodies.

I believe this is one of the most important stages when one is planning one's illustrations. To draw the emotions, the trauma, the troubles experienced by these young men. The pace and forcefulness were supposed to be relentless; each new illustration was supposed to reveal something new and take us to the very heart of the event, which is then developed in the second and final part of the picture book, in which we meet my grandfather and his story.

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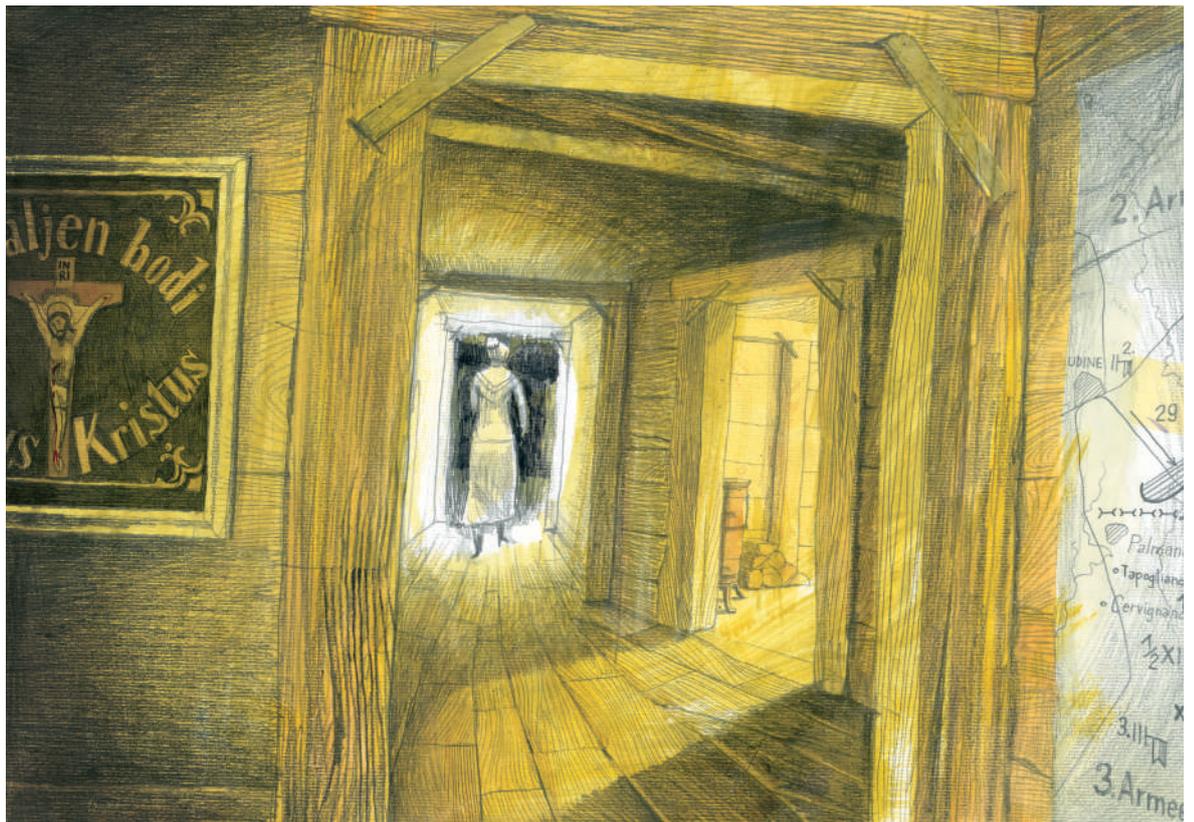
One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

One thing I was concerned about was that the illustrations could become too much like photos and thus lose their impact. I wasn't trying to imitate photos, nor do I believe that the quality of illustrations should be judged by how photo-realistic they are.

This can happen when one is faced with a huge amount of material that one wishes to include in the illustrations and thus show the diligence with which one has approached the task. However, such illustrations are emotionally empty, there's no spark to them, no matter how well-drawn they are. They are like a user's manual that one throws away after reading. I thus came to a very important realization: that I should not pack individual illustrations with as much information as possible but should rather leave an empty space that the reader could populate with their own experiences, emotions and stories. Illustrations should also not be too cluttered with various objects or inventory, as this can disturb the reader's absorption and divert their attention to unimportant things. In short: less is more! Or rather: there should be just the right amount of everything.

Illustrating this book was the first time I've ever felt as if I was taking the reader by their hand and leading them through the landscape and amidst the soldiers, into the trenches.

In the second half of the book, this sense of being an invisible observer becomes even more pervasive, particularly when we find ourselves in front of a guard in one of the trenches. A band of light emanating from the cave shelter brings a suggestion of muffled voices, perhaps even of laughter. There's life in there! We enter, we're invisible, none of the soldiers react, nobody has noticed us. We're still invisible. We look around the corridors, searching for our hero, bumping into his comrades playing cards. There he is, just about to fall asleep. But he senses our presence and wakes up and is unable to go back to sleep. On his bed, he rises on his elbows and tries to look at us. He can't see us but nevertheless follows us out of the shelter, outside, into the cold clear night. We try to outrun him, but he keeps following us. He wants to stop us, he's concerned that we'd wander too far off, into the range of enemy weapons. Still,



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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

crystalline air is rent by a shrill whistle of a grenade that falls directly into the cave shelter. Only one man survives. My grandfather!

In this part of the picture book, the events and atmosphere build up, in order to culminate in the key moment when the grenade falls into the shelter. I'd spent a lot of time thinking about how to render the explosion, as we all know that explosions occur in an instant. The explosion is actually the briefest event in the book, but also the most important one, and fateful for many. It wipes out people's lives in an instant; in an explosion, you probably don't even have time to realize you're dead. I was wondering whether I should use a whole two-page illustration for this shattering but brief scene, reflecting on the issue of time and pacing in picture books. If at the beginning of the book, we were slowly walking in a circle and observing from a distance, we're now relentlessly being carried into the heart of the story, becoming a part of it, and as we reach the centre, the most terrifying thing occurs: while we have escaped the explosion that should have killed us as well, it has taken our comrades, our friends ... Can the final illustration in this picture book be a happy one?

Can such an ending make us glad to be alive?

These were the questions I was considering as I was looking for a way of ending the story. I realized that the whole story would depend on the final illustration; whether it would stand or turn out silly and unexciting.

Although my grandfather probably felt a certain sense of satisfaction, of happiness, the details around his outline tell a completely different story. His comrades, dead, mutilated, with their clothes torn off and barely human any more, lie across the muddy field, in craters created by past grenade explosions. As if they had fallen into graves that had been dug out in advance ...

And my grandfather's survival is just a stage before a new battle, a new round of suffering ...

I deliberately made the book open-ended, the readers are left unsatisfied; we may have survived the battle, but the war ...



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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

This is a tribute – mine, Lucija’s and the publisher’s – to the fallen, the suffering, the missing millions in World War I.

The Miš publishing house is planning to publish one picture book dealing with World War I every year until 2018 and thus commemorate and honour everybody involved in the war: the soldiers as its primary actors, as well as children, mothers, the elderly and animals; they have all suffered and all have been traumatized by the war.

I have a feeling that nature remains wounded and scarred from the battles, the bombardments, the violence. If nature remembers, as people do, and if we can write and illustrate books, share memories with each other – how can we help nature express itself?

This idea of universality, of not being able to limit and categorize and tame emotions – and that man is, after all, a part of this nature – was another thing I was reflecting on as I was doing the illustrations for this book.

I’ve certainly been changed by this picture book. I’m not the same person I was when I started it. And if you, dear reader, can experience some part of that, my work will not have been for nothing.

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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

Gaja Kos, Damijan Stepančič: "Svobode ti posamezen tekst omogoča točno toliko, kolikor si je lahko privoščiš sam"/"Every Text Leaves You as Much Freedom as You Can Afford to Take", *Literatura*, Issue 303-304, pp. 104-118.

Damijan Stepančič (1969) is one of the leading Slovenian illustrators, the recipient (in some cases more than once) of a number of awards and accolades. One almost has to try not to find a book on a random bookshelf that he'd had nothing to do with. Stepančič works alone or with his wife, writer Lucija Stepančič, or with other Slovenian authors, repeatedly with some of them. He has an affinity for comics and tends to approach illustration studiously, always looking for new ways of expression. In short, he is an artist for whom boring his readers with the same thing over and over is a thoroughly alien concept.

Literatura: *Many illustrators are said to have a recognizable style, however, this simply means that they always draw in roughly the same manner. You're a direct opposite of that, often surprising your readers with a new style or technique. Do you feel that this increases your "market value", or has trying out new things resulted in resistance or disappointment or even rejection by any of your clients?*

Stepančič: I'm not really interested in what's "marketable" and what isn't. It's that simple, and I have little to do with it. I don't really try to have a recognizable style. Having a style is like wearing chainmail. I believe style can prevent one from expressing one's ideas in a multi-layered manner. Most artists become prisoners of their style and stop developing their creativity, repeating themselves like parrots instead. As if you could carry on all your life's conversations using just a couple of words. But that's impossible, isn't it? However, in illustration, that's what's supposedly desirable. But it stunts and limits one's thoughts.

I don't think editors are particularly anxious about what Stepančič is going to come up each time. I've never encountered any resistance or rejection, though we'd had some conflicts when it came to cover selection.

Literatura: *Good technique is definitely a prerequisite if one wishes to transcend the usual ways of drawing; but what fuels such diverse creativity – is it curiosity, an experimental streak, a conviction that every text demands a suitable approach? What is it that directs your decisions in this regard?*

Stepančič: It's a combination of everything you've mentioned. I think it's great that you'd mentioned good technique, which I think about as being good at one's trade. This, I believe, is severely underrated nowadays. Only when you figure out for yourself that your illustrations must be technically impeccable can you become relaxed about what you're creating. And that's the better part of it. But I'd like to point out that a certain precision is required even in this second phase, that it's perhaps even more necessary. Telling and interpreting a story is hard and responsible work. At least that's how I see it. Only when you achieve a certain level of seriousness can you make progress and, paradoxically, develop your style.

It's a simple fact that illustrations for Oscar Wilde have to be different from illustrations of e.g. African fairy tales. The stories come from different environments, make different points, have been created in different time periods. An illustrator should have that in mind before proceeding. In short, every text is a unique organism with unique features, and a sensitive illustrator must take that into account.

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I select the technique or illustration style spontaneously, it's simply a response to the manner in which a certain text speaks to me. That's why multiple readings are so important, I have to understand the text and delve deep into it. That the first step of my planning.

Literatura: *I imagine some illustrators like to shut themselves in their studio with the text; you, on the other hand, often take your text outside, into the field. What cases necessitate or may benefit from such a studious approach and what do you get out of it?*

Stepančič: If you want to scale a mountain, you usually start at the bottom, on level land. And there are an infinite number of paths leading to the peak ... It always feels great to start reading and mastering a text in an unusual place or *topos*. It's like standing at Archimedes' point and being able to move the world ...

Lately I've been enthusiastic about texts that place great emphasis on open spaces, on specific locations, such as a forest, a river, a lake, etc. I first felt that way with Grimm's *Iron John*, which takes place almost entirely outdoors, by a stream, in the forest, at a jousting tournament, etc. This text made me constantly feel as if it were greater than myself, as if I'd not mastered it yet, there was a huge number of details that eluded me. And the chosen cover was anaemic. On the other hand, there's Gregorčič's *To the Soča*, a poem about the most beautiful river in the world, which, however, also carries the agony of border conflicts and is a symbol of Slovenian national rebirth and struggle against foreign masters. I went to see it, practically from the source to the outlet, and thus to immerse myself in its rapids, its oxbows, to feel its energy. I tried to somehow understand and feel what Soča meant to Gregorčič – much more than being a beautiful river.

All this gives me confidence and resolve and courage when I'm working. You have to familiarize yourself with the text, breathe with it, get to know all its details. If that requires going outdoors, that's what I do. And that's what I think it's all about. All great art, be it a piece of music, a novel or a picture book, is convincing in its expression. I also pick up impressions in various museums near and far, particularly nautical ones. Everything is extremely interesting, and if I can use any of the things I see in my illustrations, well, that's just a bonus.

Literatura: *You're interested in a bunch of different things, excited by maps, antique ships, etc. I feel as if you keep everything you've ever seen, read or experienced in your head, ready to use it when it might come handy.*

Stepančič: I generally try to memorize or sketch the impressions you'd mentioned, rather than take photographic evidence. I have a mnemonic that I use and I'm very careful to commit things, images, atmospheres to memory, to connect different impressions, etc., and keep everything in my head. On some occasions I do take photos or get books – but only to remember other stuff as well. You can't limit memory, every time you drag something to the surface, there's a bunch of other things that don't belong there. That is, recollection can be creative. And I think that might even be the essence of creativity ... You never know when an impression or scene from your memory might insinuate itself into an illustration. I'm sometimes surprised myself, and not always pleasantly. When I read a text, that's already a thing of memory, an interpretation of a memory, I don't want to limit or isolate things ... Maybe that's why I need to read the same texts multiple times, and maybe that's why a decent amount of time must pass between my first reading and my creative work. I use this time to reflect and combine things and consider this a part of the creative process, despite the fact that the paper is still blank at this point.

I try to fill my illustrations with as many things I'm interested in as possible, and see, I might provoke an interest in antique ships or maps in other people as well ... That's usually the way it goes: you can't make other people enthusiastic about things you're not enthusiastic about yourself.

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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

Literatura: *Again and again it strikes me how closely, carefully you read your texts and how you manage to provide an interesting interpretation even of tiny details in seemingly simple texts, sometimes even finding in them things that the authors themselves weren't aware of ... I'm sure that you have read a lot, and I guess close reading is a precondition to getting the most out of a text.*

Stepančič: That's true, close reading is essential. I keep in shape by reading as much as I can, including (and perhaps especially) texts that I don't intend to illustrate. Fiction and non-fiction. I believe a text's best qualities lie in that which is not mentioned, not described, that which is left off the pages, which we can only guess at ... And that's the aspect I'm most interested in. I use this no man's land, which doesn't even belong to the author, for illustrations. Because illustrations are not simply a replication of the text in picture form, they're an organism in itself, with its own logic. Only in such a way can they coexist with the text.

Literatura: *Not to be too serious – but does your close reading have anything to do with the fact that your wife Lucija Stepančič is a literary author?*

Stepančič: It might. If you live in such an environment, it's going to show somewhere. This is best seen in children who live in such environments and are shaped by them.

Literatura: *You and Lucija often collaborate, together you've created a number of children's books. What is it like to collaborate with "family"? Is the text left entirely to Lucija and illustrations entirely to you or do you discuss both aspects and build on each other?*

Stepančič: It's impossible to draw a line where text ends and illustration begins. It doesn't even make sense to try. Both can be discussed, and I like it when authors tell me what they consider important, though it's not a given that I'll follow this to the letter. Collaboration with my wife is special, because we both have insight into the other's creative process, we comment on it, direct it, develop it, etc. However, long-term collaboration of such kind requires a lot of wisdom, as you can inadvertently intrude on your collaborator and thus irritate or anger them. On the other hand, texts where I have no contact with the author can be quite liberating as they allow me to make decisions by myself and align my illustrations with the text as I wish, with the author only ever seeing the final results of my work.

One advantage of familiar collaboration is that you can discuss things at any time and any place, however, this can be quite stressful for artists who are not in shape. Changes and corrections are executed quickly, and usually to mutual satisfaction. Another aspect of this is that I – as Lucija is great both at writing and at immersing herself – sometimes suggest certain topics that I'm currently interested in; that's how we'd created our picture books on World War I.

Literatura: *To what degree does such familiar collaboration differ from your collaboration with other authors and what are the effects – if there are any at all – of repeated collaboration with a single author (I'm thinking of yourself and Peter Svetina, for example, with whom you've created a number of books)?*

Stepančič: Collaboration with Peter is special for me; with his early work, I'd been quite surprised by the fact that his texts come across as dense and complete, although they're generally simple and not very long. As an illustrator, I'd never had the problem of running out of content, motifs for my drawings, when I was working with him. It was actually quite the opposite. Another interesting aspect of his stories is that I'm always able to geographically locate them. I.e. his *Fateful Covers*, a detective story, takes place in one of the finer villas on Njegoševa

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One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

ulica and around the St. Joseph Church under the Ljubljana Castle. In short, his work always contains a *genius loci*. In any case, it's a valuable experience to collaborate repeatedly, as it allows me to follow his development, as well as my own.

Literatura: *Have you ever wanted to write a text yourself, i.e. to create a whole picture book by yourself? Well, I should correct myself: you've already done that, as you're the author of one of the few Slovenian wordless picture books. Where did you get the idea for The Story of the Anchor and what do you think is so great about wordless picture books, both for the author and for the reader? Are you planning any others?*

Stepančič: Textless picture-books certainly have a special status. I generally prefer telling a story with pictures instead of words. I make such picture books out of a certain need, they're created in fragments; at first, there are individual scenes (usually tied to existing locations), which then grow, combine, develop, evolve; with picture books that do have text, the creative process is generally more predictable and more or less determined in advance.

I actually got the idea for *The Story of the Anchor* from my middle son, who innocently asked me what an anchor was doing in the centre of Ljubljana, a hundred kilometres away from the ocean. The picture book was created as a response to this question. I thought it important that the answer should not be too simple, simplified, banal. The readers (!) of illustrations have to get to it by themselves. With *The Story of the Anchor*, the important thing for me was for the story not to be linear, from the first illustration to the last, but rather encouraging the reader to look for a new story at every reading, to invent it, return to previous illustrations, skip scenes, etc. In short, for the reader to be active.

I have at least two more textless picture books in my head. I'm gathering material for them, and not just in the field. I'm combining, editing, changing the motifs, outlining and slowly approaching their culmination.

I'll write a text when I'll have something concrete to say and when I'll believe this would be interesting for other people as well. For now, I prefer to leave writing to people who are better at it than me. All too often, we believe that everybody can write and draw for children. This is best evidenced by the daily *Goodnight, Children* show on Radio Slovenia 1.

Literatura: *Another such picture book has appeared recently, to great acclaim – A Boy and a House by Maja Kastelic. What's your opinion on the work of the younger generations of Slovenian illustrators – is there more interest for illustration nowadays?*

Stepančič: I'm not exactly up to speed on domestic production, but my general impression is that if there are good and smart clients, i.e. publishers that develop and support their authors and illustrators, quality will follow. However, there are fewer and fewer of these ... When you're at the start of your creative career, you're still looking for yourself, trying out various possibilities. I myself needed a couple of years to get a feel for the sense and role of illustrations in a book. For them not to simply be an add-on to the text. I believe no school can teach you that, you have to find it out through experience. Today, however, publishers are approached by perfect young perfectionists with brilliant style – as if a personal style is the greatest thing that can ever be achieved.

A good picture book certainly requires creative experience, focus and discipline, which are qualities largely absent from the modern world. Because today form is always more important than the content. I find that many picture books underestimate their readers, as if a picture book was a crutch for bad students. Whom I ask to forgive me for this simile. In many picture books, illustrations are simply an add-on to the text and thus of lesser worth.

4

One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

Literatura: *Is there anything you miss in Slovenian literary illustration if you compare it to foreign practices?*

Stepančič: I miss all the things that I miss in most editors: a vision, courage, a desire to shape and educate the reader, to help them grow instead of simply satisfying average expectations and thus upholding the belief that reading is unimportant. The picture book has to be allowed to breathe, as it has the advantage of saying things with images and thus not requiring a lot of reading experience. I feel as if it has come upon a wall and we had to help it scramble over it ... I miss experimentation and innovation. Because, yeah, well, who's going to buy such picture books? But of course nobody can buy them if they never even appear in bookstores. And let's stick to authors who sell well ... I really dislike the mentality that reduces children's books to stupid toys.

I miss personal passion and commitment to work. If you're enthusiastic about what you're doing, I'm sure you can pass on some of your excitement to your young and adult readers.

I'm making it a point to mention not only children, but also adults passionate about picture books, this endangered species in the world that stereotypically believes that picture books are just for children. That stereotype is extremely prevalent among serious, solemn readers ... I try to use diverse content to draw in a wider readership of varying ages. For when is one actually too old for picture books? At 18 or at 81?

Literatura: *In addition to literary illustration, you're quite well-acquainted with comics. These are published in our magazine as well – your “comic op-ed”, on which you again collaborate with Lucija. You usually adapt existing texts to the comic medium, but what do you think about single-author comics?*

Stepančič: I find comics to be one of the most energetic media today, giving us huge amounts of exciting stories and reflections, convincing and personal visual poetics. That's probably why I'm an avid reader and collector.

One important feature of comics today is that they're grown up, no longer simply a pastime, they don't simplify their topics and don't make them banal. Their stories are multi-dimensional, original, worthy of re-reading. The same goes for their visual aspect. I feel that a medium's maturity can be judged by how well it is able to tackle serious subjects. And maybe the picture book should grow up in such a manner as well, to leave all the bears, bunnies and princes who don't put away their slippers and don't want to wash their teeth behind and become more confident and adventurous? And look towards serious topics – I'm sure young readers would be interested.

That's what I miss in illustration. Or illustrators.

I've been noticing lately that comics are becoming longer, like little encyclopaedias where the readers can immerse themselves in the story. It's an incredibly contagious feeling. I've bought myself a comic about Jack the Ripper titled *From Hell*, which is in itself a little trip around London and its dives and among the heroes of that time, complete with a number of annotations, connections, references and quotations. As well as an extensive bibliography and an author's afterword. The story thus comes across as complex and responsive and can easily compete with novels, TV series, computer games. And if the visual artist is able to make use of all that potential, then the victory is complete. You get a sort of a meta-work.

Literatura: *To return to illustration – you have provided a visual aspect to many (major) works of poetry, e.g. Kosovel, A Toast by Prešeren, you've recently completed the illustrations for Gregorčič's To the Soča River; I believe such projects – even more than others – require a*

4

One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

good concept; is that true? You probably had a lot of freedom in all these projects. But generally – are you ever concerned with the target audience’s expectations, and do you think one needs to be or shouldn’t be?

Stepančič: Every text leaves you as much freedom as you can afford to take.

Because poetry has different laws and uses a different, dense, metaphoric language, a solid concept is sometimes half the work. Especially in authors as potent as the ones you’d listed.

While in *A Toast*, it was mostly about interpreting and upgrading Prešeren’s text, Kosovel’s poetry involved researching his associations, connections and concepts. Two quite different approaches, really. And that’s how it is in what I do: I try to get as close to the text as possible. However, this deliberate reduction of distance can result in excessive emotions or feelings of involvement. I’ve experienced this to a particularly large extent when I was drawing the illustrations for *Anton!*.

Literatura: *Books often have afterwords by literary theorists, historians, critics, etc., but illustrators rarely, if ever, get a chance to speak, even in works where the illustrator’s part is definitely the greatest. Do you agree that it would be right to rectify this?*

Stepančič: As illustrators express themselves with images, people probably expect us to be stuttering zombies unable to form a complete sentence. It’s true that (self)reflection is lacking, but I don’t know whether this is due to the illustrators’ laziness or to the fact that *Otrok in knjiga* is the only magazine willing to publish such reflections. Not to even mention reviews of picture books. I don’t think that an illustrator’s afterword would solve this, after all, the purpose of the afterword is to present to the readers in an understandable manner the development and concept of illustrations from the artist’s first reading to the finished book.

Literatura: *Every publisher has a designer (whether good or bad), but only one has a visual editor – how important and valuable (or limiting) is it for the illustrator to collaborate with both of these? Has it ever happened to you that poor design ruined your work and “overwhelmed” the illustrations?*

Stepančič: I believe collaboration with both is very important, especially with the one visual editor. As I was starting out, I never paid attention to the visual aspect of the book, but now I think it’s one of the most important things, if not the most important. Initially I always visualize the book as a whole, as a unity of the text, the illustrations and design. And I visualize the illustrations as connected to the text and design. I pay attention to the scanning and designing processes and to the printing of the book. Every stage is important, things can be overlooked at any point. And usually the results are satisfactory. My books are no longer poorly designed or carelessly set.

Literatura: *Like most Slovenian illustrators, you collaborate with various children’s magazines. How much of your creative time do you give them and what does such collaboration mean to you – primarily a safe monthly income or a proving ground for new techniques?*

Stepančič: In my case it’s more about testing out new ideas. Also, I primarily draw comics for magazines, which I’m very happy about. And if this is accompanied by a monthly income, so much the better. At the same time, the publishing dynamics of magazines force me to work quickly and not waste time on fruitless pondering. It makes for a dynamic creative process.

4

One or two appreciative essays, interviews or articles

Literatura: *We sometimes get the feeling that almost all awards are won by Damijan Stepančič. Is there any that you'd like to nab or perhaps receive again?*

Stepančič: Yes, there are many awards. I'm very happy about each and every one of them, as they all represent a vindication of my creative process. Which, I realize, is not the most common ... The awards have given me a certain creative autonomy, a chance, at least I think so, to suggest things of my own, to provide advice to publishers as they're planning their programme. And the fact that publishers trust me, or at least I believe so.

Literatura: *How picky can an illustrator like yourself be when choosing their clients? Do you take every job that you have time for or do you consider the extent to which a certain text/project interests you or presents you with a challenge? Do you ever turn down a job if the text doesn't have a certain level of quality?*

Stepančič: As I was starting out, it was very important for me to have a lot of commissions, to be able to work more or less continuously. I never took breaks in-between books, and it turned out this was a good thing. What I was unable to realize in one book, I realized in another. It's very important to execute one's ideas as soon as possible, as the book's release then allows one to judge whether they were successful.

Many artists are wary of such a pace, worried that it might deplete them of ideas, and so they prefer to save themselves and work slowly and keep stuff back. My approach is the exact opposite, I give the text a chance to win me over and convince me, in a way, I make myself available to it, like a medium. Working in such a manner, I found that my energy doesn't decrease, but rather that immersing myself in the work increases it. It's a mystical thing that I can't explain. Of course, not every text is conducive to such a process, but when it happens, you know you're dealing with an excellent work of literature.

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List of awards and other distinctions

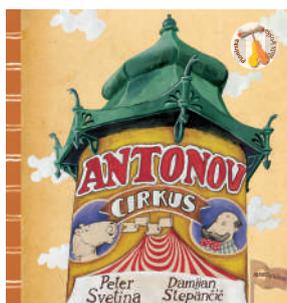


Janja Vidmar, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Leteči krožnik na našem vrtu/Flying Saucer in Our Garden,
Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2002.

2003: The Levstik Award for illustrations

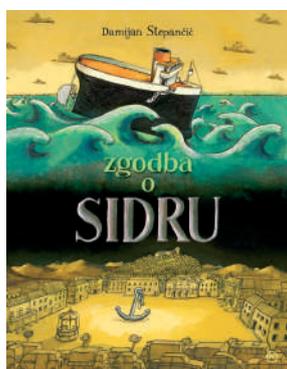
Statement of the jury:

*In the field of illustration, Damijan Stepančič develops a narratively rich and expressive artistic language. In *Leteči krožnik na našem vrtu/A Flying Saucer in Our Garden* he has been able both to use the contrast of the black and white technique and to stress the power of drawing as the fundamental method of artistic expression. He has retained in this all the imagination and wit that are the identifiable characteristics of the author in his work of illustration. He has no difficulty in extracting the essence from the mass of visual images and, in a few strokes, depicting the character of the people, the properties of the objects, and to create a space of unusual perspectives, to insert mood into events and to visualize the world of children's ideas with individual humor.*



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

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



Damijan Stepančič: *Zgodba o sidru/The Story of the Anchor,*
Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2010.

2010: The Hinko Smrekar Award

2011: The Levstik Award

Statement of the jury:

Genuinely original books are an expression of the full artistic maturity and autonomy and unique artistic peak of an illustrator's work. There are actually not many such exceptional synthetic works in domestic production, so we are particularly delighted by those that are creatively above-average.

Damijan Stepančič has above all provided us with an original picture book in which, without words, merely with convincing colored images, he tells an unusual story of an anchor in the middle of Ljubljana. The depictions are set in the recognizable but imaginatively transformed urban structure of the old city. With magical expressive power, the author achieves an elemental archaic atmosphere and a symbolic tension in the narration. In his work, Stepančič

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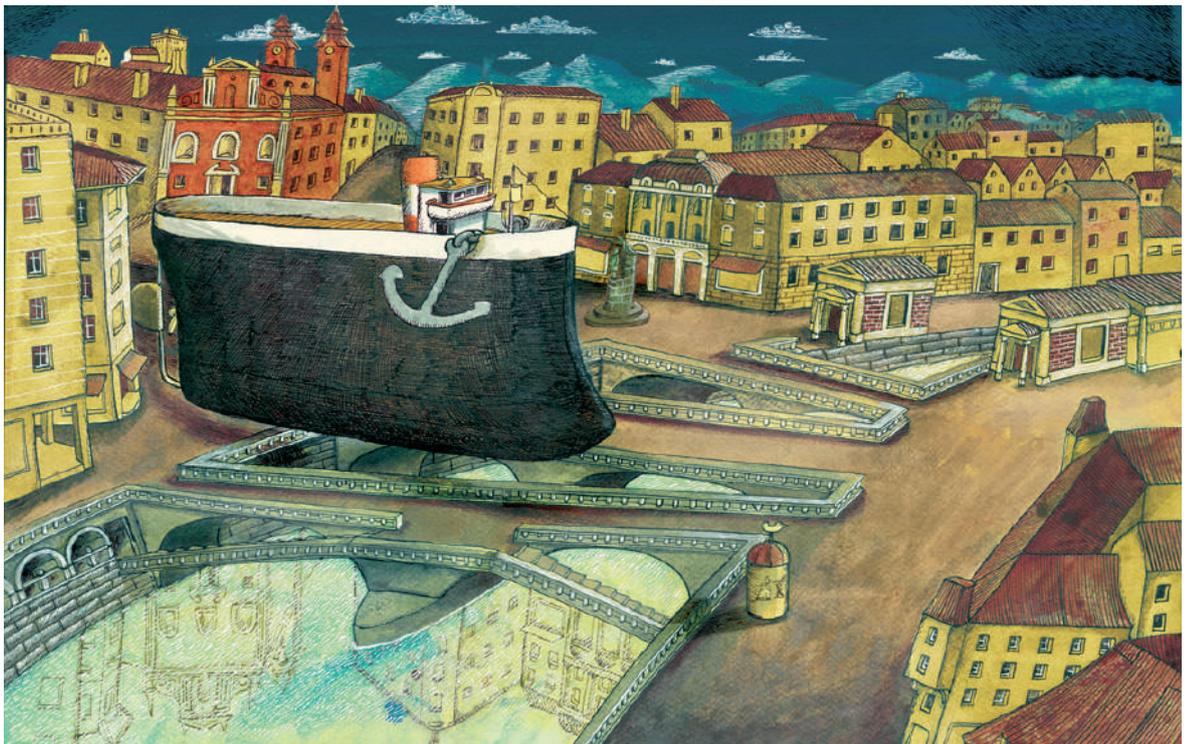
List of awards and other distinctions

preserves a profound connection with the noble tradition of painting and illustration, whereby he sensibly and confidently links contemporary artistic language with elements of old manuscripts and maps. Using original and considered strokes, he creates dynamic images full of details which, in a robustly composed totality, demonstrate the author's extraordinary artistic and vital imagination. Stepančič, like a medieval scribe of illuminations, transcribes or outlines this wonderful story, which both young and old readers can enjoy.

2012: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

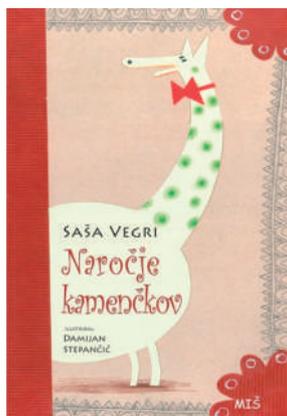
Statement of the jury:

Stepančič's Anchor is an impressive picture book, a wordless one, a type we rarely see in Slovenia, although similar books can be found on foreign markets or seen at the Bologna book fair. The picture book presents an original visual story of a ship anchor (the one located on Kongresni trg in Ljubljana since 1954, commemorating the annexation of the Slovenian littoral to Slovenia), which is, alongside the dragon, one of the most recognizable symbols of Ljubljana; the story is open enough to allow the readers to create a version of itself in their minds. What this wordless story will be like, how it will develop and how it will end, will depend primarily on the reader of the pictures, which require decent observation skills and can truly excite the readers' imagination, as their narration can be read and followed at many different levels: through individual details, through the sequence of scenes, through the riddles and mysteries of old maps and scripts, through the complicated plans of the streets and buildings where the present intertwines with the past, the interior with the exterior, the fleeting with the eternal. The images are mysterious and surrealistic, they rise up as if from a dream or the collective unconscious – symbols such as a flying ship, the Faronika fish, dragons, monsters, weaving the dreams of a child with the dreams of a nation into a common dream of humanity that used to be: dreams of home, of travel, of time and space, of beginning and end, dreams in which every path can have a different meaning, depending on the reading and on the experience of the reader. The inked illustrations allude to medieval chalcographies, particularly those by polymath J. V. Valvasor, to maps, manuscripts and educational illustrations with historical sources (dreamlike medieval hallucinations).



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List of awards and other distinctions



Saša Vegri, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Naročje Kamenčkov/The Lap of Stones,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2009.

2010: The Golden Pear Award

Statement of the jury:

Saša Vegri's poetic style is recognizable throughout her entire opus, whether for adults or children. Her poetry plays on all shades of the positive: friendliness, benevolence, fidelity, and other human qualities, which are set in opposition to the negative: unfriendliness, even evil, war, death. Saša Vegri is identifiable by her unique metaphors, her abundant use of rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and climaxes. In the majority of the poems – despite raising important existential questions – there is a clear overtone of humor and brightness, which gives these poems eternal youth and lively élan.

*Damijan Stepančič has added excellent, fairly comical illustrations which are linked to the content of the selected poetry. He has used a combination of different artistic techniques: pencil sketches and collage, colored drawing etc. His works contextually follow the arrangement of sections: there are essentially more in the first three, which feature selected poems for children and young people, than in the last three, in which the illustration is less detailed and less narrative; in the latter, he illustrates the feelings and not the stories, as can be observed in the first three sections. Stepančič's depiction of ratios is interesting: large versus small (large imperious adults and small children pressed into a corner, etc.), rounded (friendly) versus pointed (unfriendly). *Naročje kamenčkov/The Lap of Stones* is a wonderful bouquet of Saša Vegri's poetry, intended for both young and older readers, since each poem in the anthology is a pebble and together they create a colorful mosaic of valuable (children's) poetry.*

The poet Saša Vegri was a librarian in the Pioneer Library in Ljubljana for many years, the main Children's Library in Slovenia. To celebrate her 75th birthday, an anthology of 75 of her poems has been gathered and published. They have been selected from her entire poetical opus and arranged in five sections: from the first one, small, and almost childish, to the last one, mature, and somewhat maternal. There is poetry for children, youth, and even adults. Some poems are joyful and they take us on a merry fantastic journey, whereas others tell about difficulties, loneliness, and grief. Though the poems are varied, they work nicely as a whole with the illustrations of Damijan Stepančič, one of the best young Slovene illustrators: he has set the different "stones" in an attractive mosaic. Dr. Igor Saksida, the leading Slovene children's literature expert, has written an excellent introduction to these poems by Saša Vegri and selected excerpts from her professional articles about children and reading. The book is designed for readers of all ages and of differing expectations, offering both a modern and festive impression.

Tilka Jannik




Saša Vegri
Naročje kamenčkov
 (The Lap of Stones)
 Illus. Damijan Stepančič
 Dob pri Domžalah, Slovenia: Miš,
 2009.
 132 pp. ISBN: 978-961-272-000-1
 (poetry, 9 +)

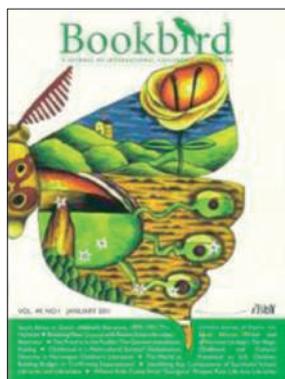
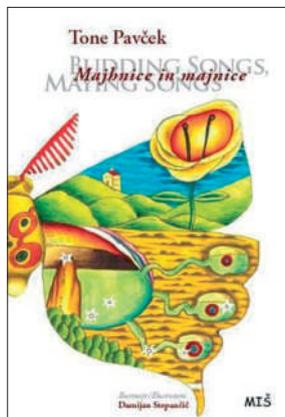
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List of awards and other distinctions

Tone Pavček,
illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Majhnice in majnice: pesmi mnogih let
za mnoge bralce=Budding songs,
Maying songs: poems of many years
for many readers,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2009.

2010: IBBY Honour list

2011: A detail from the Budding songs,
 Maying songs cover graced the cover
 of Bookbird vol. 49, no. 1.



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Stepančič, Damijan

Majhnice in majnice. Pesmi mnogih let za mnoge bralce=Budding Songs, Maying Songs

Text: Tone Pavček

Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2009

243pp; 160x230mm

ISBN 978-961-6630-87-0 Ages: 13+

Poetry



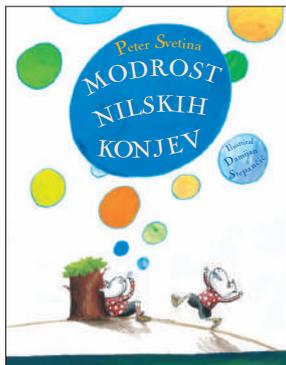
This bilingual (Slovene-English) volume of poetry by Tone Pavček was published to present one of the most prominent of contemporary Slovene poets to readers worldwide. The selection in this collection offers the poet's best works, which are mostly poems

for children and young readers, but also some poems for adult readers. In the foreword Pavček has given an informative portrait of himself and his work. The illustrator has given the poems unique and surrealistic, sometimes almost dream-like images. The colours of his double-page illustrations, which delineate the collection, together with the vignettes in sepia, breathe a touch of the old and a lyricism. The illustrator is characterised by his use of various artistic means of expression.

Damijan Stepančič (1969) graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana. He creates book illustration, strips, animation and puppets, as well as collaborating with periodicals for children and youth. He has illustrated about 30 books for children and young people. He strives to ensure with his illustrations that the literary and artistic elements work homogeneously and creating a totality, thus satisfying the ever more demanding reader. He does this subtly and extremely imaginatively. In 2006, he took part in the Croatian Biennale of Illustration in Zagreb, and he has similarly been selected several times in the Slovene Biennale in Ljubljana. He has received important national awards for his work.

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List of awards and other distinctions



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

2011: Nomination for the Večernica Award

2011: Listed 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 slowcoach protagonists transform into helpers and world-explainers without them even realizing it. And because Marcel and Hubert often take things literally, their stories are great fun to read.

2011: The Golden Pear Award

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 over 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 excel in the illustration aspect, editor Breda Rajar at DZS has here 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.

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List of awards and other distinctions



Živa Deu & Bara Kolenc, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Kje pa ti živiš?/Where do you live?,
Ljubljana: Rokus Klett, 2010.

2011: The Golden Cube Award (For Media in the field of Architecture)

2011: The Golden Pear Award

Statement of the jury:

In spite of the fact that the number of Slovenian educational books for young readers lags far behind the number of translated titles, some of our publishers are brave enough to take on projects of their own and treat us to two or three great original books of this nature every year. One of such books jutting out of the average this year is the first original Slovenian children's picture book about architecture. Upon publication, it had already received a lot of attention from the expert community, was awarded the Golden Cube 2011 award and had convinced Pionirska with its original way of presenting information.

The educational picture book in which the literary story is just a framework for educational content clearly pieces together the facts needed to create a house, just as those who actually build it piece together their materials. The book's authors capture the young reader's attention with a child's decision to build a treehouse, which then triggers a number of questions about homes and structures we live in.

The authors thus upgrade the simple concept of home into a place of living, extending it to the field of architecture and classifying different types of houses and their environments. As they do so, they clearly describe the building process, from the idea to the execution. The text of the picture book is brought to life by illustrations by Damijan Stepančič that masterfully balance between creative humour, instructive straightforwardness and gentle encouragement of the child, as well as their parents or teachers.

With this book, the Rokus Klett publishing house has contributed to the culture of sharing our knowledge, starting at the foundations, which are the prerequisite for the permanence of any structure.



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

2011: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

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List of awards and other distinctions



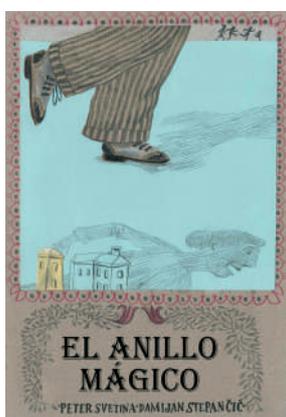
Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Čudežni prstan/Magic Ring,
KUD Sodobnost International, 2011.

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

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. Author Peter Svetina, who has won numerous literary awards, is a master of refined humor, which does not function “at face value.” The amazing miracle is wittily realized during the Ljubljana marathon, a mass competition that unfurls through the streets of Ljubljana. The humor intensifies and, because they are following the ring, a growing number of competitors combine and link the inhabitants of old Ljubljana. Witches try to capture the ring although they are the ones responsible for the whole thing. 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 with the symbols of Ljubljana in the illustrator’s story, with the Ljubljana dragon, city hall, the Robba Fountain, and other recognizable details of well-known buildings in Ljubljana. The excellent cooperation of two already well-trained artists brings a clear ethical message on cooperation and solidarity, which is stressed by the welcome humor.

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 Slovenian 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 impression of timelessness; it seems in fact as if the layers of time are laid one on top of the other, 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 Art Nouveau was also modeled on Japanese art; on careful observation, the illustrations are reminiscent of the famous French painter, Henri de 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 and unusual depiction of Ljubljana.

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 (colored pencil on brown paper) lure one into the Jugendstil era, allowing the bohemians to elegantly stroll about. (Age: 2+)



Tone Pavček, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Juri Muri po Sloveniji: Tretji del stare zgodbe/Juri Muri through Slovenia:
Part Three of an Old Story,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2011.

2012: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

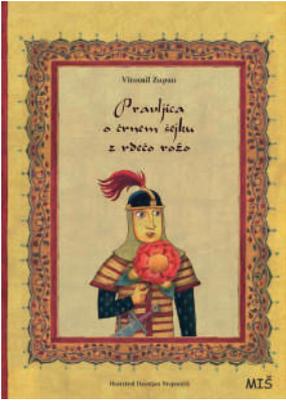
Statement of the jury:

In “the third part of an old story” about Juri Muri and his travels through the world, Juri and his faithful friend Bonga set out to criss-cross Slovenia. The friendship further deepens in the merry facetious rhymes, which measure the rhythm and meter of their “vagabond adventures”. The boys are on the verge of adulthood, though, so the adventurous travel tale slowly transforms into a love lyric. However, the path to this most distant aim – love – is fairly long and winding: across the length and breadth of the splendid Slovenian lands, from beautiful Ljubljana, Maribor, Ptuj, Piran, to Triglav and the lowlands of Prekmurje, through the hills of Dolenjska and past the barns in Bela krajina, across borders and on all four sides of the sky. The story, which could also be an interesting and stimulating guide to Slovenia for the whole family, above all presents the different cultural and natural features of the land in a unique way, through the author’s personal experience. During the travels, Juri and Bongo experience many things and meet many people, but the true and real experience waits for them much closer than they might think, under their noses or right in their home class, in the form of their schoolmate “of red cheeks and two bright braids.” So Pavček’s merry journey, full of the joy of life, also ends: “The time therefore will be for my poem to make way for love.”

In terms of illustrations, the design and text function as a harmonious whole. The text is balanced and functionally designed. The white area gives the picture book a sense of space, the paper is experienced as an imaginary space in which the reader can observe shifts, deviations, and a great plan. The movement unfurls from left to right. The vignettes of Bela krajina, Zeleni Jurij etc. are charming. Despite the fact that the picture book describes the “Slovenian chicken” (a reference to the shape of the country), it radiates cosmopolitanism. Slovenia is presented in it as a large country, since it offers so many interesting features and experiences; it can even be viewed as an exotic land if seen through the eyes of Juri’s African friend Bonga. In the disciplined design breaks, the layout of the illustration is carefully planned, as is the amount of text. Elegant and poetic but, at the same time, a robust literary organism with high-quality preparation for print and a well-considered choice of print face, which enables the reader easy readability irrespective of the brightness, color or explicit paper structure of the foundation. Along with suitable front matter, the result is an excellently executed picture book. Stepančič’s illustrations are reminiscent of the artistic depictions in the Ciciban magazine of the 50s and 60s of the previous century, the time of creation of Pavček’s first Juri Muri, the boy who didn’t like to wash. It could also be an homage to the first illustrator, the artistic mother of Juri Muri, the painter Melita Vovk-Štih.

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Vitomil Zupan, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:

Pravljica o črnem šejku z rdečo rožo/The Tale of the Black Sheikh with the Red Flower, Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2011.

2012: The Kristina Brenkova Award

Statement of the jury:

The Tale of The Black Sheik with The Red Rose is a magnificent picture book. A precious pearl, hard to come by in the Slovenian literary field. Similar picture books are occasionally found on foreign book markets and admired at the Bologna Book Fair. The picture book by Zupan and Stepančič is a distinct overachievement not only in last year's Slovenian picture book harvest, but also in the production of many recent years. It is a pure creative overachievement, stemming from an intimate need to proclaim one's love. It charms us with its storytelling power and it is also a true feast of words and pictures combined. Artistically rich illustrations follow the story faithfully, yet also enrich it with their own artistic story line, creating a harmonious artistic organism.

The Tale of The Black Sheik With The Red Rose is a grand picture book, an eternal book, meant more for an adult reader than a child, but perhaps also for a teenager, who is exploring life and starting down the path to complicated adulthood. The publishing of the picture book itself is a unique fairy-tale miracle. There were so many coincidences at play, so many energies and magical helpers intertwined; starting with Ifigenija Simonovič, who gave the original manuscript to the National and University Library, and the copy to the right publisher, who knew how to select just the right illustrator. All of the participants put in an enormous effort of humanistic values, hard work, and deep knowledge to pull off the creation of such a treasure seventy-three years after its inception.

The fate of never before published manuscript of The Tale of The Black Sheik With The Red Rose is very unusual, fairy-tale like indeed, as the manuscript somehow survived the storms of WWII as well as those of the post-war world, the storms not kind to writers and their dear and near. To have this hand-crafted booklet, written by Vitomil Zupan from the depth of his heart for the love of his life, then illustrated, hand-bound into a notebook, tied up with golden string, put for safeguarding into a beautiful hand-crafted box (on display at the National and University Library in Ljubljana) with the intent to give it to Nika, his love and future wife, for Christmas 1938, survive all the hard times, is in itself a symbol, with a deep and important message. The author poses the question, important for every human being, overreaching each and every historical, political or societal framework. It reaches across the board and unveils the dilemma of the choice between power and love, just as valid today as in the future, as long as the man exists. The symbolic fabric of this fairy tale, spinning its yarn like one of the mysterious Scheherezade's tales from One Thousand and One Nights, speaks of essential truths. It speaks of unconditional trust in love. This is the dilemma presented to the prince Samum Al Arida, unbeatable warrior and defeater of nations, strong and undefeatable emperor, who in his magnificent invulnerability desires to uncover and find true love. Love, the key motive of the fairy tale, symbolically represented by a ruby, the stone of love, that the prince can create according to the advice of a wise man, from seven drops of blood, shed by true love, is the most difficult of all his conquests.

Not only are there such drops of blood in short demand in the world yearning for power and authority, but questioning love is also questioning the power of one's own sacrifice and trust. As the prince is quick to find out, the bitter truth is that people don't make sacrifices anymore, and do not die for love, but only because of hatred and greed. The stone of love indeed brings the prince the love of the woman he recognizes from his dreams, Alna-The One. Yet in

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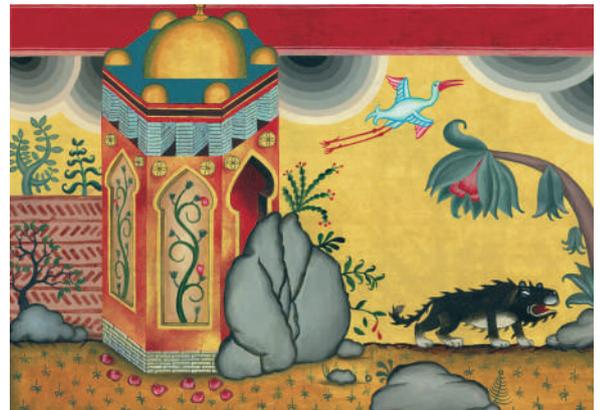
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one single instance of doubt, his momentary weakening of trust is enough to bring his love to an early grave and death to his happiness. He has lost the best and the happiest part of himself, the prince of The Land of Red Flowers. That is the price to be paid for throwing away the stone of love. The sheik without love can only be the last master of the desert Al Arida, the merciless, cruel, and undefeated black sheik with the red rose.

It is possible to recognize “Slovenian traditionalism” in Stepančič’s illustrations, similar to the illustrations of Marlenka Stupica from the 50s (e.g. in the picture book *Snow White* by Brothers Grimm). The period of the text suggests that Stepančič placed the images into the era of Persian miniatures and sourced the rich cultural tradition of Islam.

This sense for design is noticed right in the title, where one can observe the calligraphy reminiscent of Arabic writing. That immediately gives us a sense of what kind of story the reader is stepping into, undoubtedly a story placed in the Orient. The whole book is a model of good design, also in the functionality of reading, as the text resonates well with the illustrations. We recognize the logic of the design; the illustrated vignettes are also excellent. The rare paper is made to look antique on purpose, with the patina of time letting us know that the work was created many decades ago.

It seems the work miraculously reached us after such a long time with the purpose of bringing its symbolic message to current, as well as future readers.

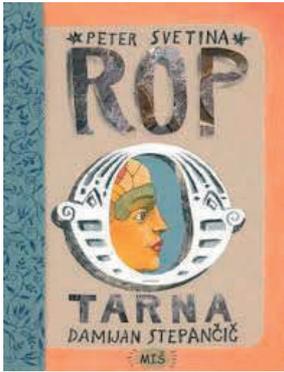


Lucija & Damijan Stepančič:
Kako so videli svet/How They Saw the World,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2011.

2012: The Golden Pear Award

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Peter Svetina, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Ropotarna/The Lumber Room,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 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: The Golden Pear Award

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 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 porthole formed by the "O" 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 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 he 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 twelve stories and nine 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.

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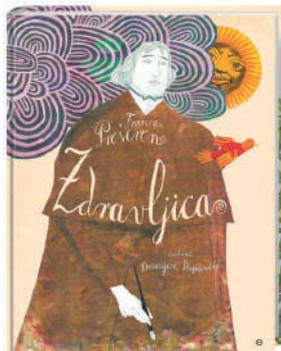
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2018: On the list of books recommended by the 2018 Hans Christian Andersen Award Jury (<http://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/awards/hans-christian-andersen-awards/hcaa-2018/the-jury-recommends/>)



Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Železni Janez/Iron John,
Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2013.

2013: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award



France Prešeren, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Zdravljica/A Toast,
Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2013.

2013: The Kristina Brenkova Award



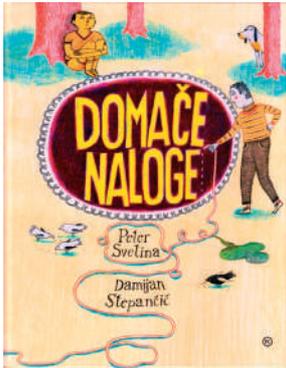
Vinko Möderndorfer, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Kot v filmu/Like in a Movie,
Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2013, 2014, 2015.

2013: The national project Growing Up with a Book for primary school students

2013: Večernica Award

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

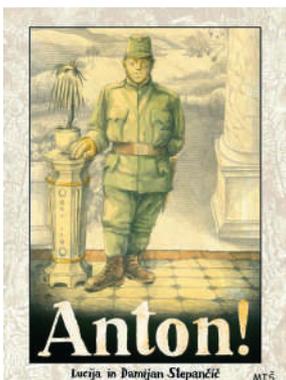
2015: Nomination for Večernica Award

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 relationships between people, 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. The tiny blade of grass suddenly grows into a huge, strange tree whose branches/fingerposts point in completely different directions. ... 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.



Lucija Stepančič, illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Anton! Dob pri Domžalah*: Miš, 2014.

2014: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

2015: The Golden Pear Award

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

2016: Večernica Award

Statement of the jury:

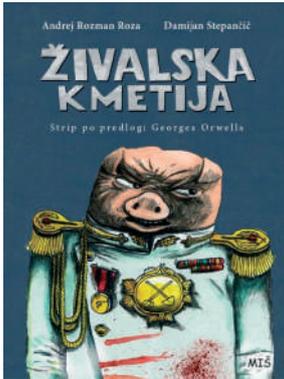
The *Ripening of Porcupines* (Miš, 2015) by Peter Svetina is an excellent collection of nonsense animal stories dominated by witty linguistic and representative notions and playful twists and turns. What is unusual about such poetics, however, is that in Svetina's case laughter is intertwined with an 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 makes words senseless and imbues 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 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.

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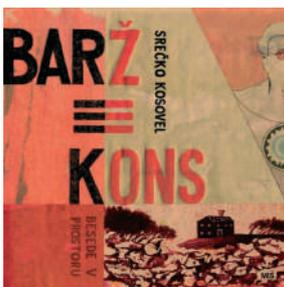
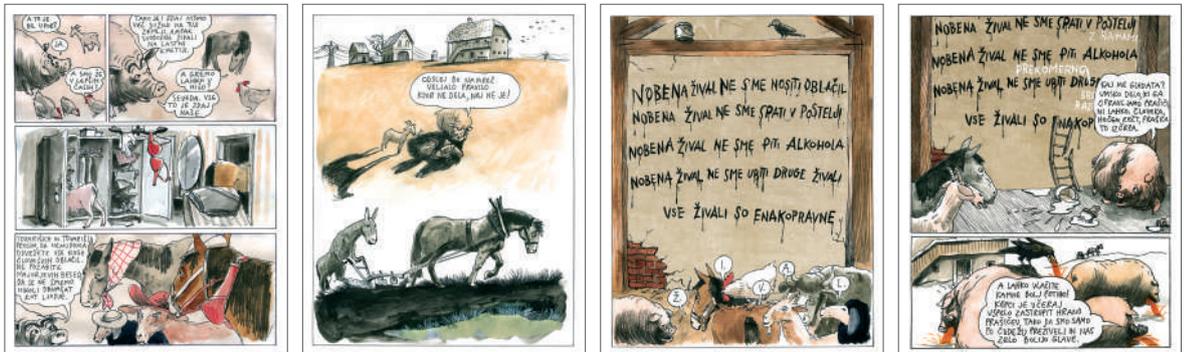
Damijan Stepančič & Andrej Rozman Roza:
Živalska kmetija – Strip po predlogi Georgea Orwella/Animal Farm – A Comic Based on the Novel by George Orwell,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2015.

2015: The national project Growing Up with a Book for secondary school students

2015: Listed in the White Ravens Catalogue

Statement from the White Ravens Catalogue:

Slovenia’s best-known illustrator Damijan Stepančič opts for harsh and bloody imagery in this new comic-book interpretation of George Orwell’s Animal Farm from 1945, directly conveying the cruelty and perversion of the well-known parable on political rulership and the communist social system. The particular transformation of the pigs from “normal” animals to a power-hungry, ruling class with gluttonous, scheming apparatchiks is foregrounded especially well. One of the best-known and highly prized children’s book authors, as well as (children’s) poets of Slovenia, Andrej Rozman Roza, has masterfully transcribed Orwell’s text into dialogue and put it in the mouths of the animal protagonists. He thereby gives the story a new incisiveness and contouring in redux. This Animal Farm also occasionally warns that these events could have happened in Slovenia. (Age: 12+)

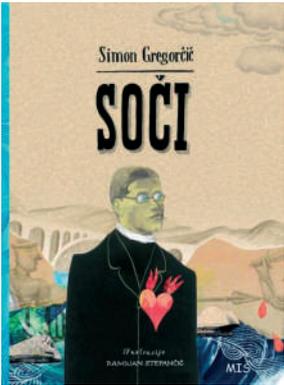


Srečko Kosovel, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
BARŽ ≡ KONS/VELVET ≡ KONS,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2015, 2016.

2016: The Best Designed Slovenian Book Award/ Literature

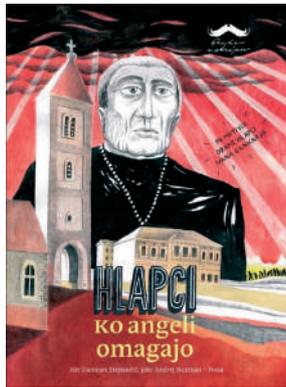
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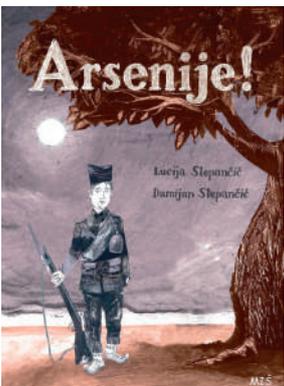
Simon Gregorčič, illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Soči/To the Soča River, Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2016, 2017.*

2017: The Kristina Brenkova Award, special recognition for innovative artistic interpretation of a classic work



Andrej Rozman Roza & Damijan Stepančič: *Hlapci: Ko angeli omagajo/The Servants: When Angels Grow Weary (Strip po motivih drame Ivana Cankarja/A comic based on play by Ivan Cankar), Bevke: Škrateljč, 2017.*

2017: The Best Designed Slovenian Book Award/Comic Books, 2017



Lucija Stepančič, illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Arsenije! Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2017.*

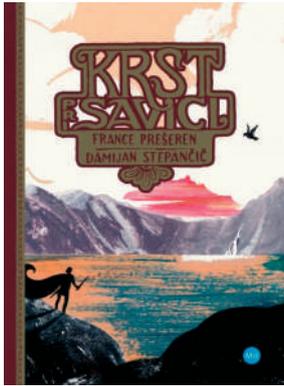
2016: The Hinko Smrekar Award for Illustrations

2017: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award

Arsenije! is a picture book for both young and adult audiences, written by Lucija Stepančič and illustrated by Damijan Stepančič and published by the Miš publishing house. The book represents an exemplary, poignant and visually inventive treatment of a historical subject, characterized by an eerie visual and textual atmosphere, by pain and its expression in the unusual perspectives of war and suffering. Colour symbolism and illustration technique, which sometimes turns grotesque, further underline the absurdity of war and the whiteness, emptiness it leaves in its wake.

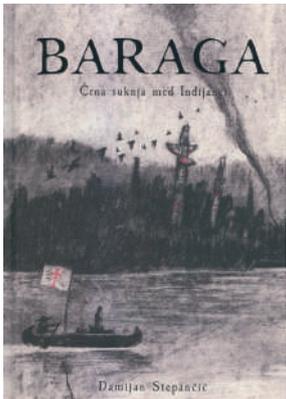
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France Prešeren, illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
**Krst pri Savici/Baptism by the Savica Waterfall,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019**

2019: Nomination for the Kristina Brenkova Award



Damijan Stepančič: **Baraga, črna suknja med Indijanci
/Baraga: A Missionary among Native Americans,
Ljubljana: Družina, 2020.**

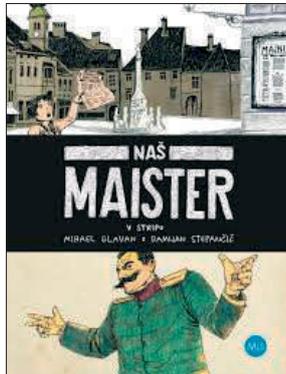
2020: The Kristina Brenkova Award for Innovative Graphic Interpretation

We have been following Damijan Stepančič's extraordinary, richly varied, and unique artistic production for a number of years, but he has astonished us once again with his picture book/graphic novel hybrid Baraga: A Missionary among Native Americans. He has written and illustrated the story of Friderik Baraga (1797—1868), a Christian missionary who worked with Canadian indigenous people. Stepančič has created over 150 charcoal drawings, using an extremely difficult technique. He incorporated the very texture of the paper into his drawings, bestowing a distinctive rhythm to the images and the storyline. He has succeeded in upholding profound emotional suspense throughout the book – from scenes from the life of the Ottawa tribe, their culture and beliefs, to images of the sea and the wide Canadian plains. The plot rests on the power of the gaze, all the emotions and relationships are reflected in the eyes. The design and composition are governed by the rules of the picture book and of the graphic novel interchangeably, thus appearing multiform and effectively allowing the wordlessness to speak. The elaborate illustrations open up a range of symbolic meanings. The sea, the seagull, and the snow trails stand for the beginning and end of life, for courage, for the journey, for solitude, the “devotion, wisdom, and unshakeable faith in God and Native Americans” – the elusiveness of the inextricably connected. With this book about Baraga, which breaks graphic novel conventions, the Družina publishing house has brought something new to the Slovenian picture book tradition.

The jury presents the book with a Special Recognition Award for Innovative Graphic Interpretation

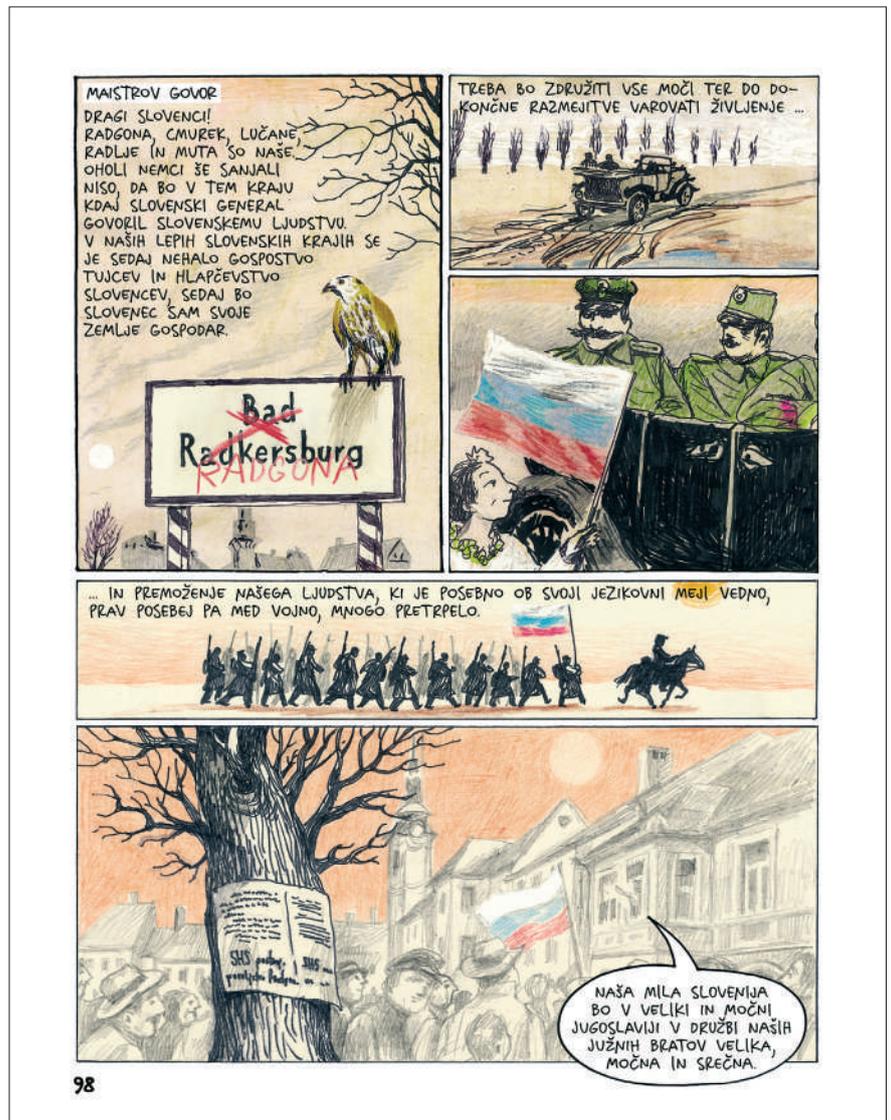
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Mihael Glavan & Damijan Stepančič: Naš Maister/Our Maister, Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019.

2020: Nomination for the Zlatirepec Award for the best original comics publication of the year



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Complete bibliography of the books for children and young people by the candidate

Author and illustrator

STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Svetilnik. (The Lighthouse)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019.

STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Baraga: črna suknja med Indijanci. (Baraga: Missionary among Native Americans)*. Ljubljana: Družina, 2020.

STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Ko bom velik/a, bom ... (When I Grow Up, I'll Be ...)*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2010, 2011.

STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Zgodba o sidru. (The Story of the Anchor)*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2010.

Illustrator

Peter Svetina, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Modri Portugalec (The Blue Portugal)*, KUD Sodobnost International, Ljubljana, 2021.

GREGORIČ, GORENC Barbara, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Negotove pesmi (Uncertain Poems)*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2020.

STRLIČ, Nataša, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Osamosvojitvev (Independance)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2020.

KOREN, Majda & STEPANČIČ Damijan: *Kapo in Bundo (Kapo and Bundo)*. Ljubljana: KUD Sodobnost International, 2020.

GLAVAN, Mihael & STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Naš Maister (Our Maister)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019.

PEGAN, Vanja, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Vsaj za pesem odmaknjen od tega sveta (At Least for a Poem away from this World)*. Piran: samozaložba, 2019.

KOŠUTA, Miroslav, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Ljubezni to pesem (Love to this Poem)*, Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019.

PREŠEREN, France, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Krst pri Savici (Baptism by the Savica Waterfall)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2018.

KODRIČ Filipič, Neli & STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Dolpagor (Upanddown)*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2018.

ROZMAN, Andrej & STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Hlapci: Ko angeli omagajo (The Servants: When Angels Grow Weary)*: Strip po motivih drame Ivana Cankarja (Comic based on play by Ivan Cankar). Bevke: Škrateljč, 2017.

STEPANČIČ, Lucija, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Arsenije! (Arsenije!)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2017.

LEWIS, C. S., Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Ta ogabna moč (That Hideous Strength)*. Ljubljana: Družina, 2017.

LEWIS, C. S., Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Potovanje na Venero (Perelandra)*. Ljubljana: Družina, 2017.

SVETINA, Peter, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Uho sveta (The Ear of the World)*. Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2017.

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Complete bibliography of the books for children and young people by the candidate

- GOMBAČ, Žiga, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Črno belo* (Black White). Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2017.
- ČUŠIN, Gregor & STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Mulc odkriva Sveto pismo* (The Kid Explores the Bible). Ljubljana: Družina, 2017.
- LEVSTIK, Fran et al: *Sončnica na rami - Pesmi za otroke od Frana Levstika do danes* (Sunflower on the Shoulder - Poems for Children from Fran Levstik until Today). Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2016.
- STEPANČIČ, Lucija, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Prehlajeni čarodej* (Magician with a Cold). Ljubljana: DZS, 2016.
- PREŽIHOV, Voranc, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Samorastniki* (Self-made Children). Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2016.
- GREGORČIČ, Simon, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Soči* (To the Soča River). Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2016, 2017.
- SNOJ Komel, Mateja (editor): *V deželo luči: božične zgodbe* (In the Land of Lights: Christmas Stories). Ljubljana: Družina, 2016.
- VIDMAR, Janja, Illustrations STEPANČIČ, Damijan: *Raketa v garaži* (Rocket in the Garage). Kidričevo: Talum, 2016.
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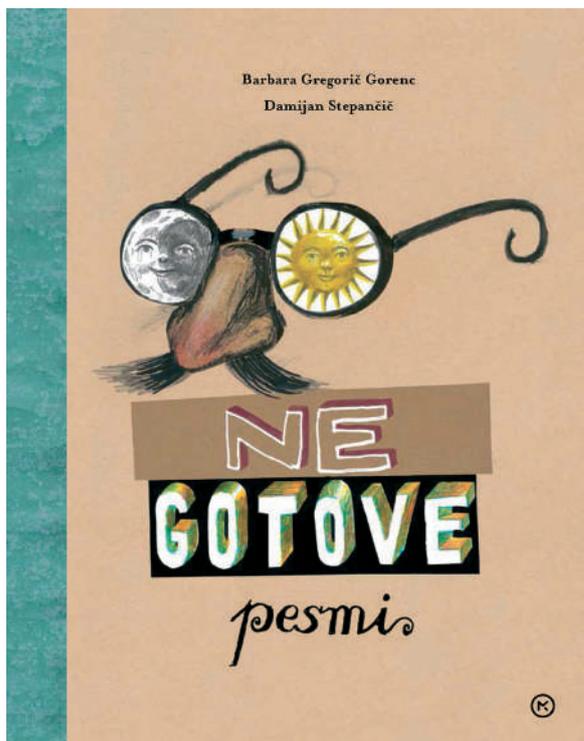
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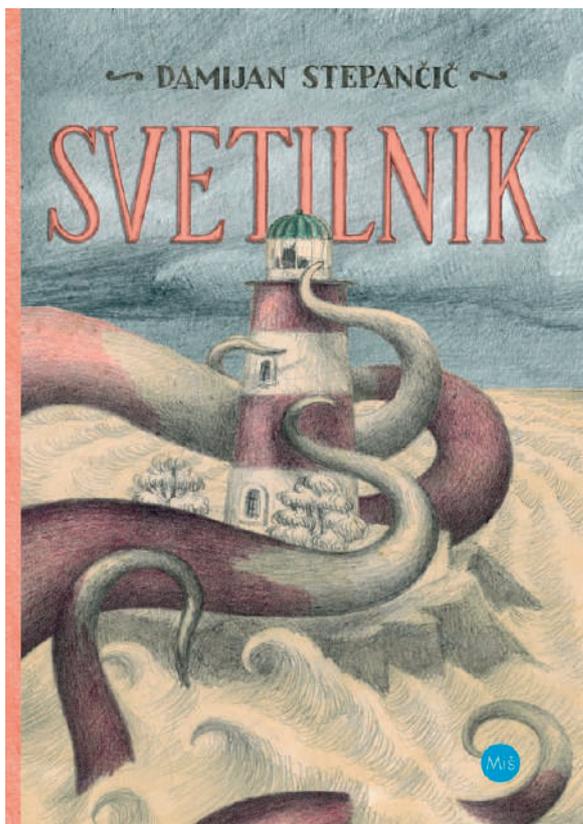
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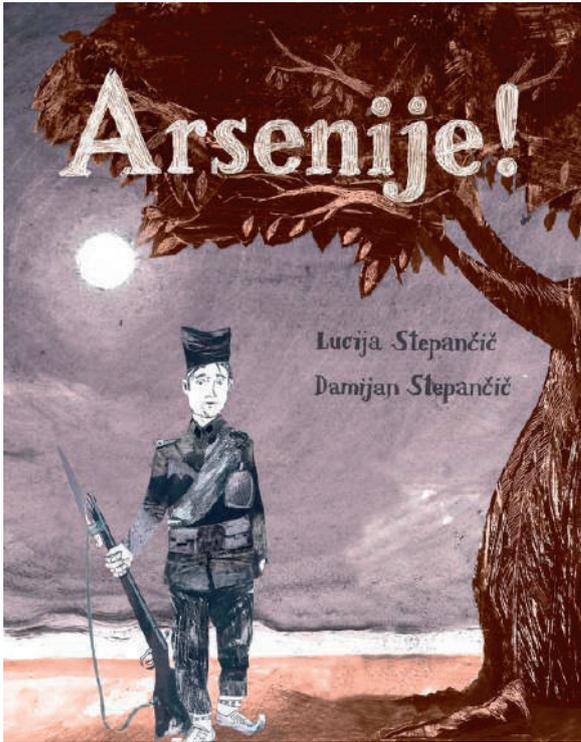
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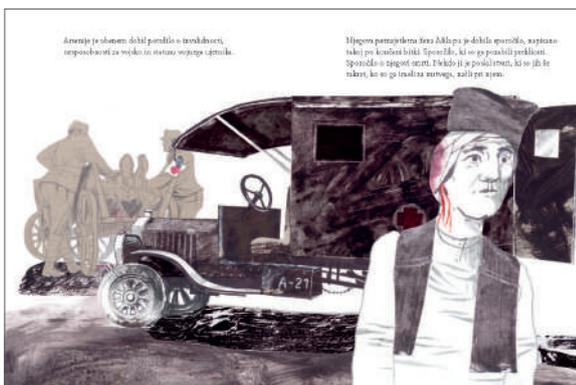


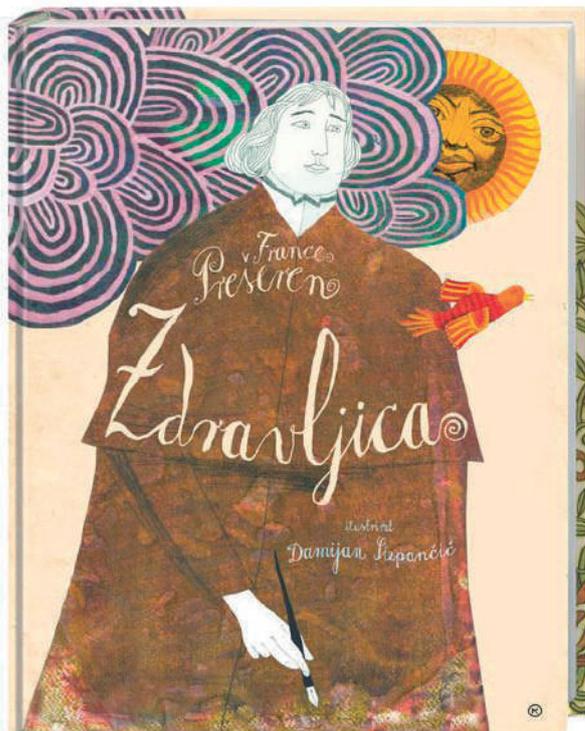
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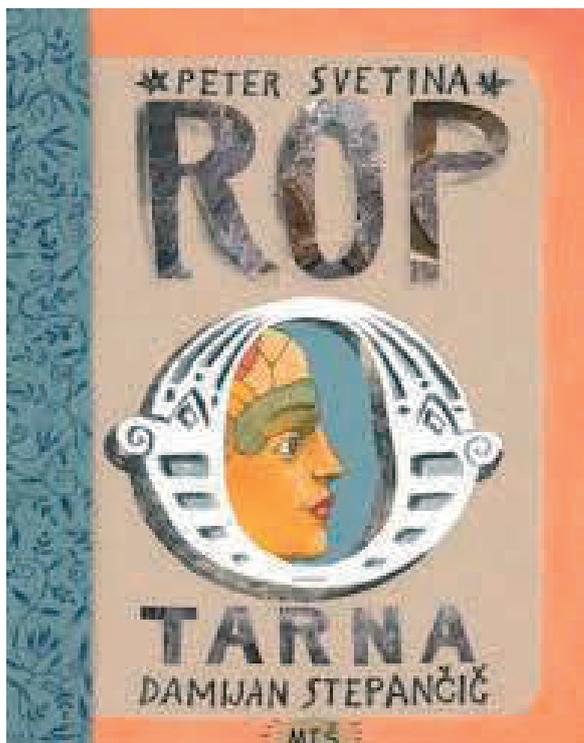
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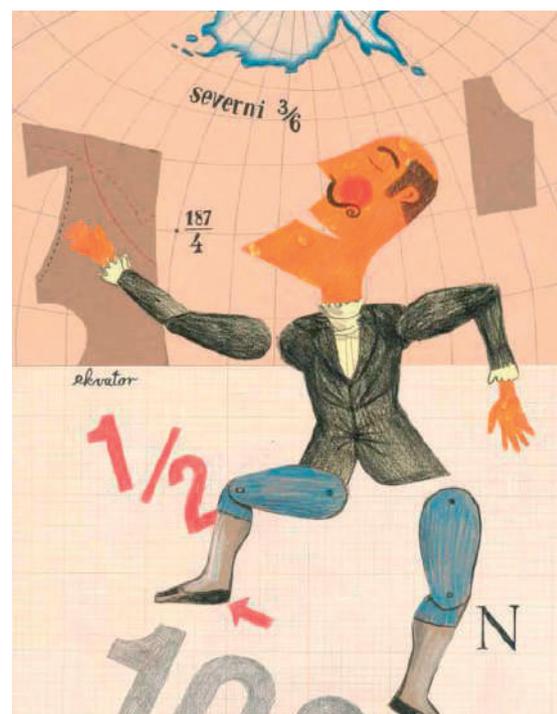


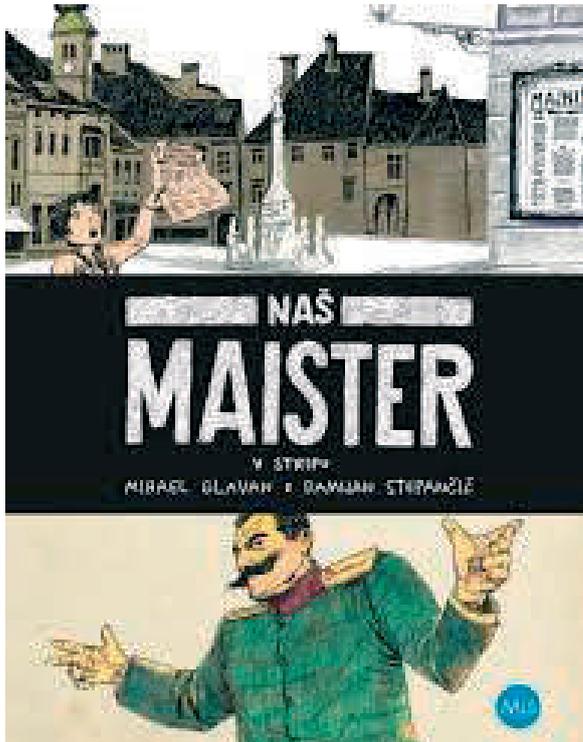
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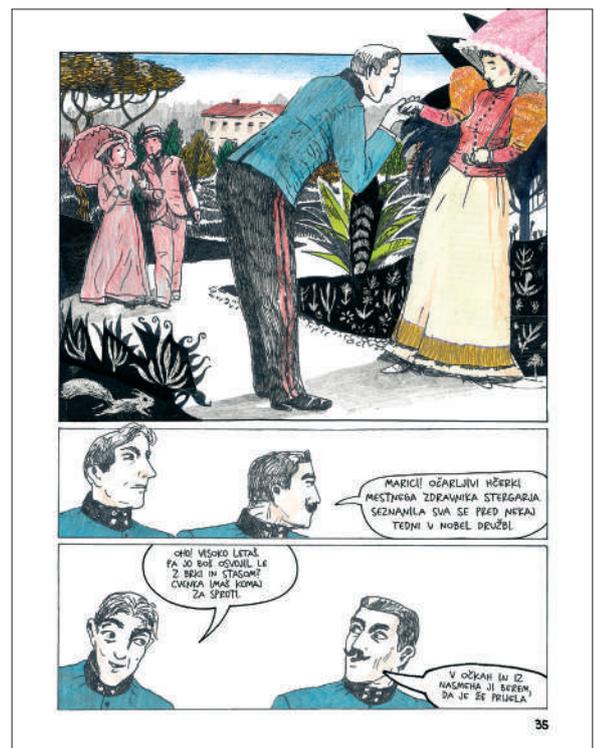
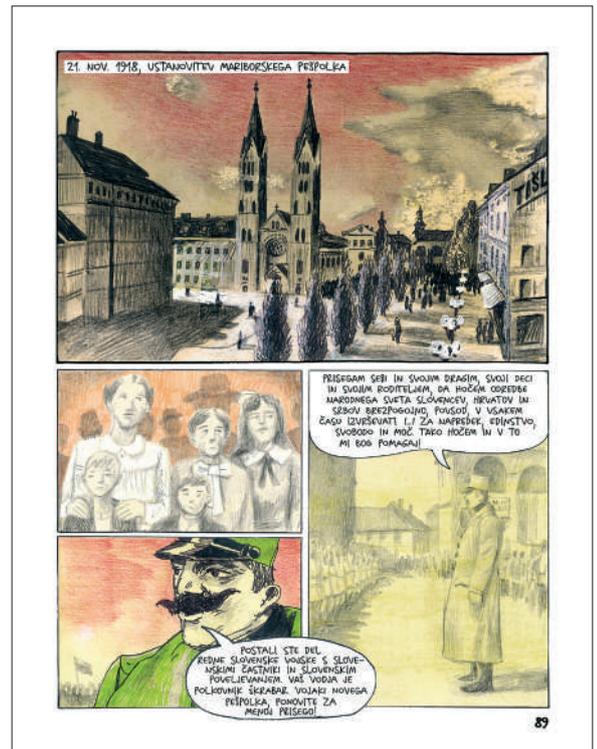


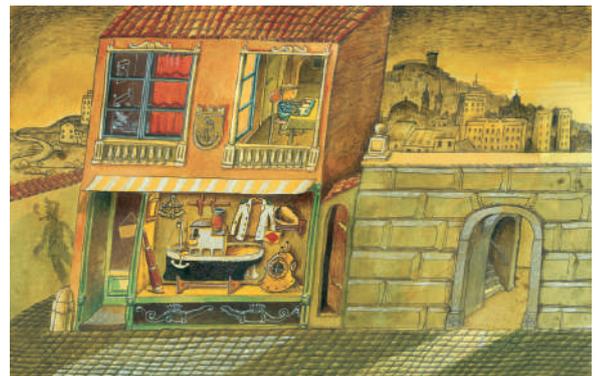
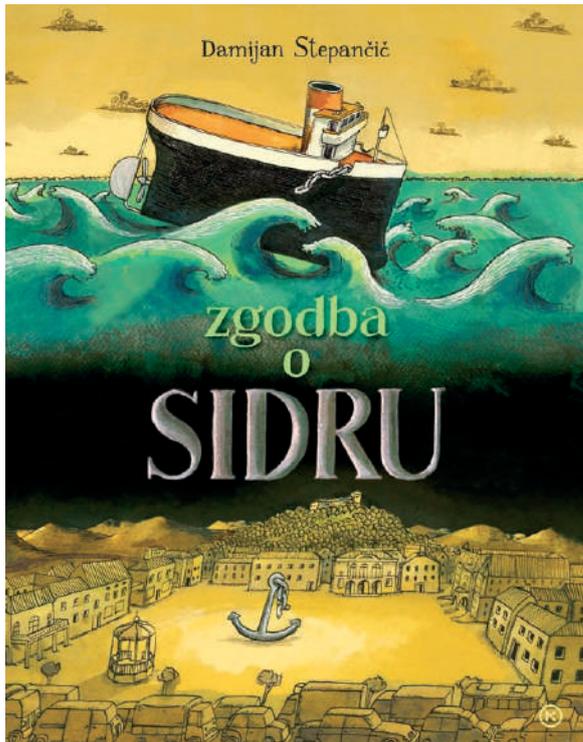
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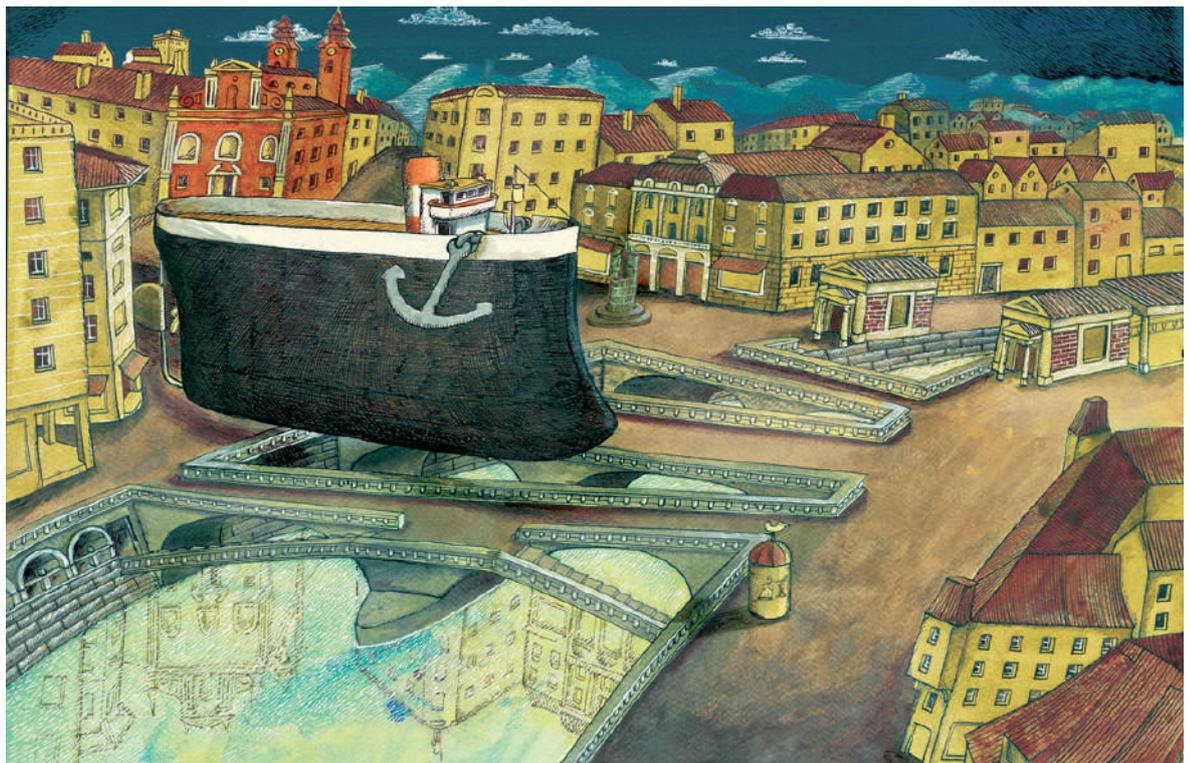


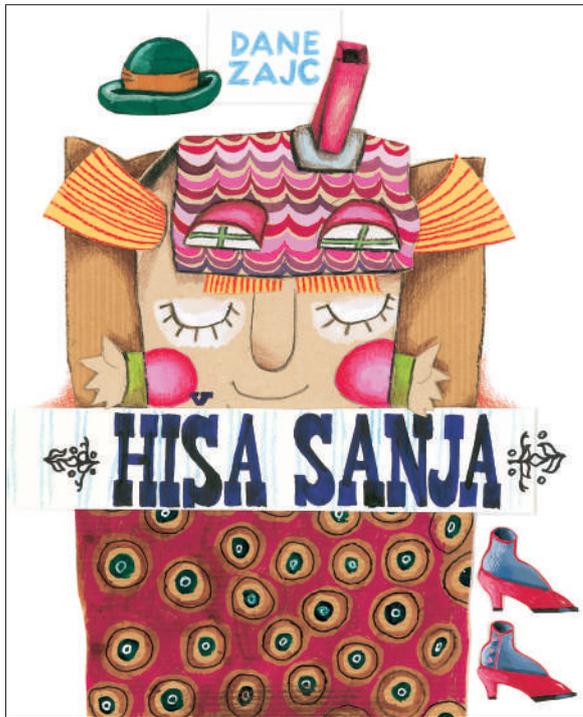
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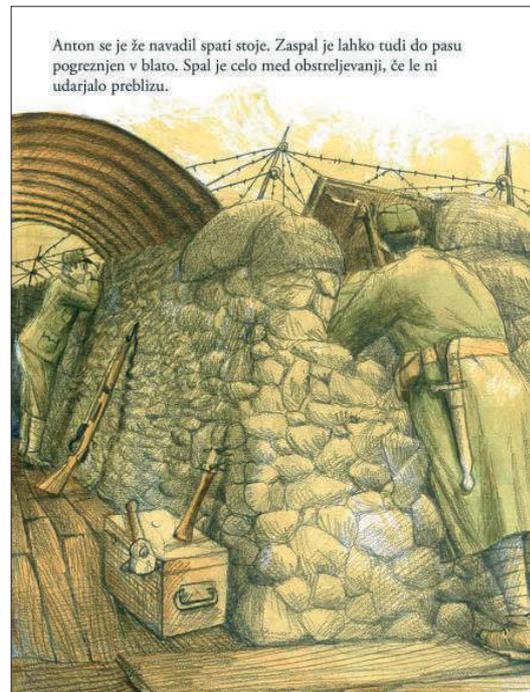
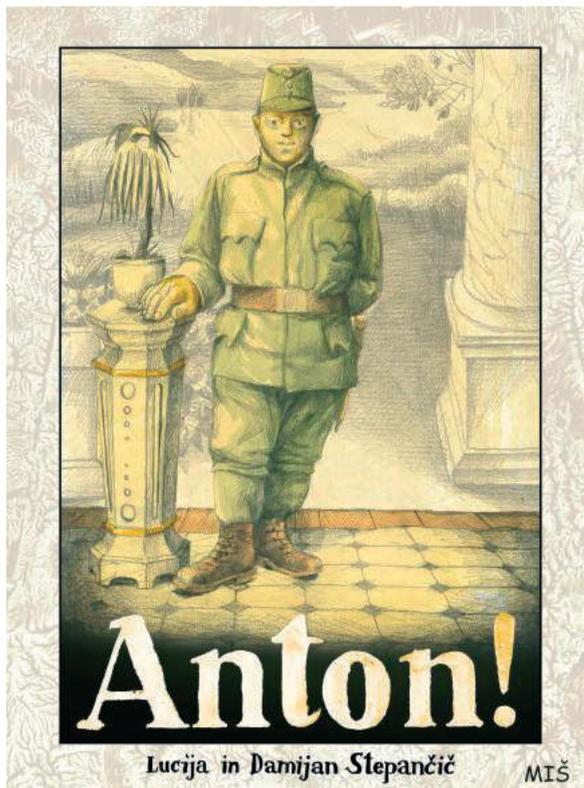
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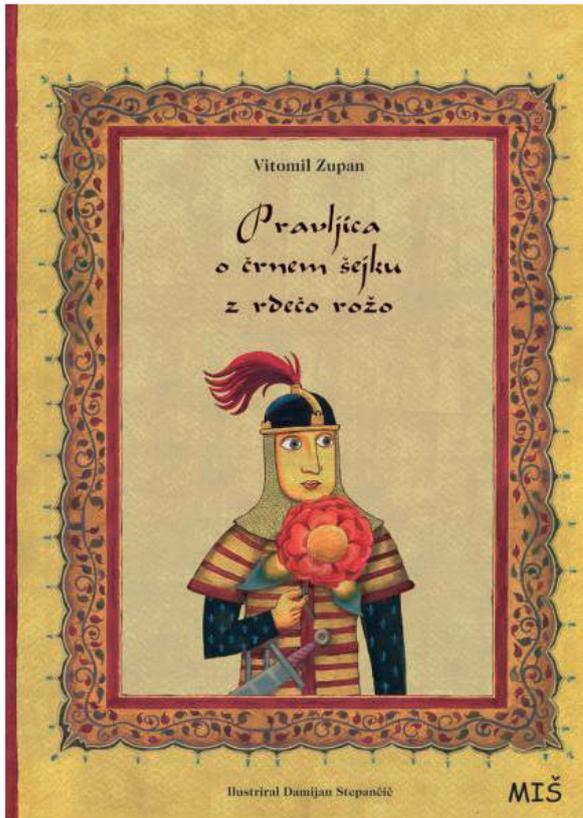
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**The Lumber Room:
an award-winning patchwork of odds and ends that works as a convincing whole**

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 obscures the meaning of the words by incorrectly grouping their syllables, e.g. "lthas 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.

**Lucija Stepančič, illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Arsenije!*
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2017.**

Ivana Zajc: "Damijan in Lucija Stepančič: *Arsenije!*/ Damijan and Lucija Stepančič: *Arsenije!*" *Sodobnost*, vol 82., no. 3, 2018. <http://www.dlib.si/stream/URN:NBN:SI:doc-F17CEEEV/4f10269c-b164-4a0f-981d-1a927f3d93c5/PDF>

Picture book *Arsenije!* is the result of the collaboration of the established creative duo of writer Lucija Stepančič and illustrator Damijan Stepančič in which the authors (like in a previous picture book, titled *Anton!*) talk about an event from a war. In this case, the book presents a story from the life of young Arsenije Simić, who was drafted on the day of his wedding and then became deaf and fell unconscious during the first battle in which he took part. As his comrades thought him dead, he woke up in a line of bodies in the enemy's camp, while his loved ones had already been notified of his death in battle. The "enemies" took good care of the young soldier and determined that his hearing had been damaged, then let him go free as part of an exchange of prisoners. Arsenije thus arrived at his home during the feast at which his death was mourned. The frightened guests ran off in all directions, except for Arsenije's young wife, who was not afraid as she "knew death well enough not to be afraid of it anymore". This amazing story then became part of the village legends. We learn of its reality on the back cover, where Arsenije's grandson Marko Simić provides a description of his disabled grandfather (he had gone deaf at the Battle of Cer and also had speech problems).

Lucija Stepančič's text is concise, written from the viewpoint of soldier Arsenije Simić. The latter is the focalizer of the story, allowing for an interesting literary effect, as all scenes of the story are related to the readers in silence, as experienced by Arsenije. The story thus becomes tangible and allows the readers to profoundly experience its events. The raging of the war is shown through the eyes of a simple young man who suddenly finds himself wearing a uniform, with the story emphasizing the incomprehensibility and terrible violence of the war and the cruelty of sudden death. The narration is stripped down and swift and clearly describes the dramatic arc; the only exception is the very long sentence on the penultimate page, wherein individual details become ineffective due to oversaturation, to the point that it seems as if it were forced on the rest of the book as an afterthought. Elsewhere, the text provides scant information, only as much as necessary to deepen the story, underlining e.g. the little gestures of help and understanding exchanged between the enemies in the war, for example when the "terrible enemy" takes care of Arsenije, returning to him "everything that had been in his pockets, all the photos and cigarettes, his wallet with all the money, and his wedding ring. Not a single thing had been missing from the package." The Germans took care that Arsenije, who was taken from his loved ones on his wedding day, could return to them upon his funeral feast.

Illustrator Damijan Stepančič invents a new, unique visual style for every picture book he illustrates, however, his style remains very recognizable. Here, illustrations tend towards dark tones, the visual treatment of the book's motifs is extremely expressive and encourages active engagement with the picture book that necessitates a discussion of what is being read. That is, the picture book is bold, it never glosses over the bitterness of war and of sudden violent death, showing for example pale bodies lined up and marked with identification labels; the fighting is shown as a dangerous rumble of bodies. The focus of the illustrations is broader than the focus of the text, as images transcend the protagonist's perspective and give a more comprehensive view of the events. The illustrations thus allow the readers to experience the cold ground, the hard metal, the dark atmosphere, the fear and shock felt by soldiers on both sides. The fateful atmosphere is further reinforced by repeated appearances of a crow, the symbol of death, which is seen in one of the illustrations spreading its wings above the body of a fallen soldier.

The picture book uses Arsenije's amazing story to explore the subjects of violence and death. The effects of violent content, e.g. of shooting scenes, on children have been a topic of debate since at least the 1960s, when pre-school children in an experiment conducted by Bandura et al. reproduced violent behaviour they had previously seen a recording of during play. Last year, a study by the Ohio University showed that the subsequent play of eight- and twelve-year-olds who had watched clips from a movie featuring people shooting at each other was much more aggressive than the play of the children who had watched non-violent clips from the same movie. However, the study took a step further: among the toys there was a real gun, without ammunition, of course. The researchers were interested in how the children would react to encountering a real weapon. About 83% found the gun, of which 27% immediately handed it to the researchers who then removed it from the room. The difference between the children who had watched clips of shooting and those who had watched other, non-violent clips was that almost all of the former pulled the trigger, i.e. "shot" the gun, while those that did so in the latter group were in the minority. Children from the first group "fired" the gun two to three times on average, holding the weapon in their hands for up to five times longer than the children from the second group. The greatest number of shots fired by a child was twenty; one of the participants of the study "shot" at pedestrians going by, while another pulled the trigger on one of the other children.

Children and adolescents are undoubtedly excited by taboo. If interpersonal violence didn't interest them, if it didn't bring up questions and dilemmas, shelves of toy stores probably wouldn't be full of plastic guns and swords. Facing such content, children are most probably trying to resolve their unspoken questions about human suffering. But what kind of engagement with violence is provided to them by our society? Films, computer games, TV shows, etc. are full of such content, and media followed by children often feature the promotion of fighting as a positive, exciting thing. One such example are computer games that feature shooting and stalking, which reward the player's aggressiveness and present war as an enjoyable competition. Such games serve up anonymous (future) body after body, which the player must eliminate as quickly as possible. However, such representations are very different from the actual human experience of war. A number of studies have confirmed a connection between violent video game content and children's aggression. Representations of war on TV often diminish its effects as well – American culture thus dictates the creation of films that idealize war violence and portray American soldiers as heroes.

Such simplified representations of violence are extremely problematic, particularly those that glorify it. On the other hand, we do our children no favours if we try to completely isolate them from any content that would show the dark side of human nature. Such removal of "problematic" content from children's and young adult literature would not make sense, as such literature is a place in which young people can be challenged to resolve certain internal conflicts. However, this cannot be achieved through passive consumption of violent scenes produced by popular culture and uncritically intended simply to excite. In our time, full of vivid images whose only purpose is to attract consumers' attention without ever being concerned about enriching them, art can thus be considered necessary. Because it's not just about *what* is being represented, but also about *how* it's being represented. *Arsenije!* offers a heartrending and multidimensional experience of interpersonal violence, showing the war in its unmediated cruelty and incomprehensibility. This is accomplished with just a few straightforward strokes, directly and uncompromisingly. The fallen are given names and identities and are more than just anonymous troops, nameless pieces on the chessboard of war. The soldiers have emotions and personalities. For instance, Arsenije sees beside himself the body of a soldier whom he remembers as one of his rowdiest comrades, "lying motionless, with eyes and mouth agape and with a large wound in his head". In its fusion of the textual and visual,

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Published reviews of the books submitted to the jury

Arsenije! offers a poignant commentary of violence and death, while at the same time paying great attention to the details of the various modes of the human condition. That is, the book shows both the mutual hate between the enemies as well as empathy they feel for the wounded, it shows the love of the unfortunate bride, her despair upon learning her beau had supposedly died and her astonishment upon his return. With just a couple of brushstrokes, the book paints a convincing picture of the war and everything that accompanies it. In *Arsenije!*, war doesn't sort the characters into categories of "good" and "evil", as enemies sometimes help each other and uphold each other's dignity as best they can. The picture book can be said to have multiple target audiences, as it is sure to stir adult readers as well. On the other hand, the child or adolescent will be able to use this wonderful, multidimensional representation of war – and a discussion of the book or a self-analysis of emotions that it stirs up – to resolve certain personal questions which would have certainly been left unanswered upon their perusal of one-sided products of popular culture dealing with the same subject.



**Barbara Gregorič Gorenc, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič:
Negotove pesmi/Uncertain Poems, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2020.**

Gaja Kos: Not the least bit uncertain poems

The extensive poetic opus of Barbara Gregorič Gorenc, most frequently illustrated by Andreja Gregorič, has for the first time been endowed with illustrations by Damijan Stepančič, which have elevated the poems and the book as a whole to a higher age level than the very same poems would likely have addressed with different illustrations. If we read the poems devoid of their pictorial complement, we would probably say that we are reading a poetry collection for young adults. Packaged with the illustrations, however, it is fair to assess that it is an ageless poetry collection. Some readers will focus on the poems, others on the illustrations, but there is no doubt that everyone will find something for themselves in *The Uncertain Poems*.

The introductory poem, “Parallels” – which questions the state of imagination (real/unreal?) and concludes that, whatever it may be, sometimes our very dreams can suggest solutions – is followed by 23 others, each one featuring an animal in the title (e.g. The Rosy Flamingo, The Hopeful Bird of Prey, The Spitting Llama...). In the poems, the author explores a variety of mental states, emotions and feelings – mainly negative ones –, and offers solutions. To illustrate: in the poem “The Rosy Flamingo”, the lyrical speaker is at a loss, he doesn’t know when to fight, when to withdraw, or when to smile... The flamingo then teaches him about the art of holding balance. In “The Lovely Mole”, for example, the lyrical speaker feels ugly until the mole explains that there are many different ways to measure ugliness and beauty. In the same way, the poet addresses instances of feeling lost, questioning one’s own identity, suddenly feeling hateful towards the entire world, withdrawing into oneself and shutting the world out, feeling that everybody is staring at you, scanning for flaws, confronting problems, low self-esteem, feeling dejected and misplaced, overwhelmed with worry, feeling frozen, afraid of making mistakes, feeling lazy when you are not lazy at all... The poet thus opens wide a whole range of emotions and frames of mind which both the young and the old are confronted with. The solution to the distress is always provided by the titular animal, spelled out in the text (along with some other words the author wished to emphasise) in block capitals; these puzzled me at first and I deemed them to be little more than stylistic overkill, but in time I realized that the emphasis in fact aids memorisation – the reader might associate the given emotion/state of mind with the specific animal faster or for longer. When, for example, readers find themselves troubled by worry-induced sleeplessness, the rhinoceros will spring to their mind instantly. The next moment, they will remember that it helps if you direct your thoughts towards something pleasant... The lyrical speaker is either male or female, and some poems are written in second person. I wrote earlier that the poet tackles mostly negative, dark emotions and states of mind, but there are some positive poems in the collection as well. The most uplifting of all is perhaps the final poem, “Mayfly”, which reads: “I’m happy / With myself today! / I love myself, / I’m bold and brave! // The MAYFLY / offers sage advice: / Love yourself ALWAYS. / Time flies.” But while the mood of the poem on the whole is light-hearted, the shadow cast by the final verse darkens the opening lines. In the end, poetry is no different to life – there is joy in it and sadness, laughter and solemnity, light and darkness. Even so, the poetry of *The Uncertain Poems* is bright and hopeful as it unflinchingly shows us a way out of the darkness and towards the light.

The blurb on the cover reads: “Now, THIS is a witty poetry collection for young adults!” But while both the text and the illustrations contain instances of playfulness, I would not describe the collection as primarily witty. There is much truth however in the ensuing lines’ assessment that it makes us feel “the playfulness and power of art.” This holds true for the textual as

well as the visual side, which displays few childish qualities, but does occasionally give way to playfulness. While some of the illustrations lean directly on the text, in most of them, Stepančič gives his imagination free rein and simply (re)creates a play of associations. The illustrations, which in classic Stepančič style blend a variety of techniques, provide the reader/observer with an abundance of possible interpretations; there are elements we can decipher and elements we have to revisit over and over, speculating whether they carry meaning or are merely there for decoration. Therein lies the kernel of the illustrator's genius – in his ability to not only engage the eye, but to engage it time and again, repeatedly.

Two things can be said about *The Uncertain Poems* without question: firstly, they offer an exciting journey, both visual and internal (exploring the winding meanders of our inner world), and secondly, they are not the least bit uncertain. On the contrary, they are very clearly assured about what constitutes a good poem, and know that every cloud has a silver lining. Or, to drop the meteorological jargon and speak in line with the spirit of the book: for every doubt that arises when we look at ourselves in the mirror, there is a curly-haired kangaroo to tell us that we look great!



**Damijan Stepančič: *Svetilnik/The Lighthouse*,
Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2019.**

M.K.: Damijan Stepančič: "I've always imagined monsters as creatures emerging from the deep dark waters," Delo, 30. 10. 2019.

Some years ago, Damijan Stepančič got a question from his son: "What is an anchor doing in the middle of Ljubljana?" which inspired him to write the popular wordless picture book *The Story of the Anchor*. He now continues with the same approach in his new book *The Lighthouse*.

The lighthouse has many meanings for him – he sees it as a symbol of anchorage and orientation in life, setting the course of where we would like to go. The *Lighthouse* centres on a boy, and features monsters that are close to the author's heart.

Stepančič received the Hinko Smrekar Award at the 9th Biennial of Slovenian Book Illustration and the Levstik Award for original illustration for *The Story of the Anchor* (Mladinska knjiga, 2010). The book was also included in the silent books collection prepared by the Italian section of International Board on Books for Young People IBBY.

The second wordless picture book *The Lighthouse* was recently published by Miš publishing house. The greatest challenge for the illustrator lay in telling the story through images only: "The images need to be put into a meaningful sequence and the story needs to evolve through them. At the same time, the reader should receive new information through the illustration in time and it should lead them to the end of the story." Narration in such books is somewhat like in a comic book, but at the same time each illustration is autonomous and self-sufficient, so it can be observed as an individual work of art.

The picture book *The Lighthouse* was inspired by the author's love for coastal villages and towns. He put the lighthouse into the center of the picture book as a strong symbol which guides sailors on their night voyage or helps them to orientate themselves in the dark. At the same time the lighthouse represents the light that highlights the storyline. The story unfolds during the night, from the sunset to the sunrise.

The Story of the Anchor and The Lighthouse have one element in common – the protagonist is a boy who helps the sailor during his night voyage. The illustrator emphasized this about the story: "Every one of us has had to make a quick decision on how to react at a certain point in life when we saw that someone needed us. We probably all know from experience what it is like to quickly come to the aid of someone, to do something for others or even save someone. Those moments seem even more prominent and non-egotistical when it comes to children."

The author has always been interested in the sea, sea monsters and other creatures. "I've always imagined monsters as creatures, emerging from the deep dark waters and caverns or as being a creation of a person's subconscious. This is a theme that is very close to my heart and is linked to the fear of monsters that are usually much greater than us."

In *The Lighthouse*, the author chose different monsters to symbolise the four elements – the ibex stands for earth, the fish for water, the eagle for air and the salamander for fire. "I wanted them to play together and be part of the same story. Of course, the story of *The Lighthouse* can be read literally or we can find figurative meaning in these symbols." The illustrator wanted to "move in the realm of the duality of reality and imagination, between the events that could potentially happen and those that are just symbolic."

We are a part of something greater, and the greater is also present in us

The Lighthouse follows the idea of one of the oldest alchemical texts *Tabula Smaragdina* (*Emerald Tablet*) which, in the illustrator's words, contains ideas that connect the micro- and macrocosm into one: "I had that in mind throughout the creation of this story. There are people, our tiny human fates on one side and on the other there are events, the environment and the universe that are much greater than us. We are a part of something greater, but also that greater is present in us."



Milena Mileva Blažič: Damijan Stepančič: *Svetilnik*, Sodobnost, n. 4, year 84, 2020.

[...] To analyse the verbal and the visual text in the picture book *The Lighthouse* by Damijan Stepančič, it is most appropriate to use Maria Nikolajeva's theory (*The verbal and the visual. The picturebook as a medium*). [...] In the article *Picturebooks and Emotional Literacy*, the author pays special attention to the analysis of literariness of the wordless picture books based on emotional and social education, analyses the elements of the scene, the characterisation, the perspective, and the time and the movement. If we apply all these categories to *The Lighthouse* we can reach the following conclusions:

1. The scene is the setting where the story unfolds; in the picture book, the scene can be an integral part and serve as a background at the same time. Different scenes in the picture books create a horizon of expectations about the genre, and are also fundamental components of the content development of the story. Stepančič frames the events within the basic time (once upon a time) and place (Poseidon is the Greek god of the sea) and provides more or less detailed depiction of external (marine and submarine world) and internal scenes. The internal scene with distinctive details is for example the two-sided illustration of the library. Two-sided illustrations depict the panoramic view of the scene.
2. The representation of the scene in a picture book that takes place in a certain historical period is essential and important for the reader's reception. We can see that in *The Lighthouse* as well. The contrasting and dramatic changes of the environment (the calm and then a hurricane) shape our expectations and are a reaction to the dynamic of the events. The illustrator additionally intensifies the contrast between safety and danger with the contrasting scenes (sea, seabed, library).
3. The characterisation: in a wordless picture book we can only observe the visual descriptions, there are no verbal external descriptions. The visual narrative is a means of depicting the inner world of the heroes, of their unexpressed fears and wishes. In *The Lighthouse* the protagonists, the fisherman and the boy, are depicted in images. The characters in *The Lighthouse* are static, less dynamic and complex, despite the tempestuous dynamics. The illustrator also uses universal and individual symbols, colours, shapes and visual associations, for example the ibex, the eagle, the fish, and the salamander... (J. Lacan: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) The illustrations depict the hero's position in space (from the idyllic anchorage to the raging hurricane) while the spatial proportions between the characters (their size and placement) determines the relationship between them (the fisherman – the boy; Odysseus – Telemachus, etc.). The characteristics of the visual story are based on non-binding conventions. (Young) readers are used to placing greater importance to the biggest figure in the two-page illustration than to the tiny shape or image, hiding somewhere on the edge of the page. The central positioning emphasises the protagonist's central role in the story.
4. The perspective or the point of view appears in picture books as a dilemma between the visualisation and narration. When examining illustrations, we can talk about the perspective in literal sense (in this picture book it is the narrative from the lighthouse point of view, which follows the events under the sea, at sea and in the air). But as readers or viewers, we can also observe the image from a certain point of view (external reading perspective) that is suggested by the illustrator (for example the symbolism of the black cat entering the house, the geometric pattern of the interior hall that could be a chessboard). The motto provides a modern perspective on the story, and the appendix places it in the antiquity time and place.

5. The time and the movement are two important aspects of narrativity that the visual level cannot adequately express. Time can only be implied artistically with the help of clues like clocks (a standing clock, a globe) or by creating a sequence of scenes, by which the reader can deduce time. The time is usually clarified in the text, but in this picture book, it is implied by the modern motto and »antique« appendix, which determine the exact timeframe and highlights the chronological links between the illustrations that archaize the modernity. The authors can also refer to graphic symbols, colours and elements inspired by the comic books (the lines on the lighthouse, the tentacles of the giant squid, the sequence of time and movement under the sea).
6. Nikolajeva quotes Ulla Rhedin and introduces the terms “familiar” or “safe” side for the left and “foreign” or “adventurous” side for the right side of the books. This is not a set rule, although it often happens in *The Lighthouse* that a situation is set up on the left side and then knocked down on the right. The left side gives a sense of security (leaving the anchorage) and the right side introduces an element of danger (hurricane). The focus of the story is shifted from the characters to the action with the help of the alchemic motto and the appendix, that fills in the blanks typical for visual stories. The story begins in the safe anchorage from which the fisherman sails and becomes increasingly dynamic and tense with the turbulent sea. The fishing turns into a mighty rumbling of nature that can be devastating for men. The basis of the story refers to the biblical literary tradition (the Flood, Jonah Disobeys the Lord, Noah’s Ark), that is defined in H. J. Uther’s internationally acclaimed classification of folk tales with the acronym ATU 973, Man as Sacrifice to the Storm, and represents the archetypal motif of the boat/ship in the middle of the storm at sea. This motif is connected to the other, ATU 974, The Homecoming Husband (e.g. Homer’s Odysseus) and is a typical allegory of the medieval legends. The visual story with the motto and appendix also refers to the archetypal journey, the hero of a thousand faces and Jason (ATU 513B, The Land and Water Ship). We can find different variations of this international classification in almost every culture.

The Lighthouse also contains intertextual references to modern stories like *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Moby Dick*, etc. From the intertextual point of view we should also mention the avant-garde picture book *The Lighthouse* by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Boris Pokrovsky (Sara Pank-enier Weld: *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*).

The visual story of *The Lighthouse* refers to the so-called literary universality, general themes that appear in literature and are presented by individualised literary characters (P.C. Hogan), in this case man vs. nature. The tension between them is shown as an external and not an internal (ethical) clash.

The visual story is contextualised by the framing story – the alchemic motto and the antique appendix – and at the end of the book, the author added an explanation of three concepts (*Fishing in the past*, *Poseidon and Giant Squid*) that help assemble the story. We should also pay attention to the alchemic motto from *Tabula Smaragdina* (“What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.”) which is probably not aimed at children and young readers but to the implied reader. It sets the wordless picture book into a textual context and characteristic ageless frame – the text aimed at children and the context at adults.

The picture book is ageless, multi-genre and definitely exceeds the linear expectations of those who promote the work as just a *children’s book* and infantilise its meaning. Such opinions limit the meaning of literary universality solely to “literal”, visible and known, and do not take into account that a picture book is metaphorically, invisibly and unknowingly, externally beyond linearity, in short, a good picture book is an individualised universality.

France Prešeren, Illustrations Damijan Stepančič: *Zdravljica/A Toast*, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2013.

Urša Izgoršek: Illustrator Damijan Stepančič: »I am here and I am not. I live in a paradox.« NeDelo, 25.10.2013.

This year's Kristina Brenkova Award for original Slovene picturebook was awarded to Damijan Stepančič for his work Zdravljica (A Toast).

With his weapon – paint, pencil and art techniques – he has tackled many things: with the verses and Jurij Muri by Tone Pavček, children's poems by Dane Zajc, intense stories by Peter Svetina, The Sorcerer's Apprentice by Evald Flisar and endless number of others that were illustrated by Damijan Stepančič. But he admits that hardly any of them was such a challenge as Prešeren's A Toast was – for which he received the Kristina Brenkova Award for original Slovene picturebook.

Zdravljica (A Toast) is by no means your typical work of literature to be illustrated. The fact that it's our national anthem must have added weight to it, too. Was it a tough nut to crack?

It was one of the hardest tasks I had ever faced. I spent a lot of time thinking about how *not* to illustrate it, how to avoid tired clichés and move away from them. This would be the case even if *A Toast* wasn't our national anthem. We've all grown up with Prešeren's poetry, known it since primary school. I wanted to grasp the text without all the clutter. And while that's my usual work process, it was all the more necessary in this case. The poem touches on a number of very abstract concepts, such as friendship and virility, it addresses girls, women, boys, and speaks of our homeland... How does one depict all that without falling into cliché, banality, or literalness? I was thinking about introducing concrete characters. Ever since we stopped using our old currency, the tolar, I've missed being able to identify with specific individuals from our history – Vega, Jakopič, Plečnik, Kobilica, Trubar... The book seemed like an ideal opportunity to include the characters that appeal to me, people I would be tempted to engage in conversation if I met them on the street. As I pondered who to include, I limited myself to individuals from the pre-WW1 era. Modern history is still too raw and I wanted to avoid taking sides. I am still very happy with what I accomplished there. Evaluating one's own work is always a problem, you have to set your own criteria.

So you already knew you had done your job well – what does the award mean to you?

I do not depend on awards in that sense, nor do they comfort me. They are certainly an indicator of sorts, but I try to evaluate my work myself. That way, I can do better, or differently, in the next project. That is the only way to grow.

The collage technique you've opted for appears so vibrant...

I didn't want to limit myself when it came to technique, so I picked the one which offered the most options. I was aiming for colour, positivity, light, and I wanted the colours to breathe. If I were to do it now, I would probably incorporate some symbolic buildings, too, such as Plečnik's Parliament Building...

Would you consider including Triglav as well?

No, Triglav would be too predictable. It appears on our coat-of-arms, our sports uniforms... *A Toast* is a European, cosmopolitan poem. It was therefore imperative that I reached beyond national borders. The people that I depicted – Alma Karlin, Noordung, Plečnik, Maister, Kosovel, Trubar – all did that.

If you could talk to either one of them, what would you ask?

I'm about to start working on a Srečko Kosovel anthology. Some of the things he said were incredibly progressive and that intrigues me. I would ask him, for example, how he came up with his idea of "the end of Europe" – a perversely topical concept. What was his position on the October Revolution? How did he reconcile his "Karstic" intimism with his globalist worldview, Italian Futurism, or Russian Constructivism? He was a man of opinions.

You live on the Karst Plateau as well – do you think of it as a place with a special kind of energy?

I don't know, it's hard to say. It's where I grew up, and I moved back there with my family five years ago. We all like it. The most important thing for me is to have my peace, and a large enough space to work. I like the soft dialect of the Karst locals; there's a lyricism there, and a certain sense of humour that doesn't stifle conversation, but invite it. I feel like the Slovenians living here are the truest of all Slovenians. But I may be harbouring illusions.

*Is it true that only one illustrated version of *A Toast* had been published before yours, and that you didn't want to see it?*

Yes, there is one – made in 1945, I believe. I did see it, but only after I had completed my work. I always try to start from scratch. It's a mimeograph print, spartan in appearance, much in line with the "shock-brigades" spirit of the time. We need a different kind of an address today.

What kind?

We need spiritual breadth, a sense of cosmopolitanism and responsibility – towards everything, the environment, our fellow man, ourselves. We no longer need five-year plans or one hundred thousand apartments by next year. We're not bricklayers anymore... We need values, trite as it may sound, and sensibility. And that is why Mladinska knjiga came to me with the idea to illustrate *A Toast*, and I'm very keen to take on challenges without knowing where they might take me.

How do you place yourself in the story as an illustrator?

I ground my work on close reading, reading between the lines, constantly thinking about things and combining them. That is why I tend to work on several things at once; if I get an idea that's unsuitable for a given project, it might still prove useful in another. That's how I keep my mind fresh. I like to jump from one thing to another. People interpret *A Toast* in different ways. For some, it's a pamphlet, for others, a toast. Some read it through the prism of its 7th stanza, others through the prism of patriotism. I had to zigzag between all of these views. I find them all interesting; it is, after all, the national anthem of each and every one of us. Its message reads: take a stand! You don't have to have the same opinion as me, but do engage yourself in the world, don't just stay quiet. I try to take a stand in what I do.

I've been researching the WWI era recently, going to archives, museum, and talking to collectors. I'm putting together a picture book based on the story of my grandfather, who fought in Galicia and on the Isonzo Front. It should be published early next year. It will be a powerful story, adapted by my wife. I've also been working on illustrations for Cankar's *The Bailiff Yernej* (Hlapec Jernej).

There are some authors that you have collaborated with on multiple projects. One such example is your wife, Lucija. What is it like to work with someone who is part of your private life as well?

There are two things that I am grateful for above all: always having work and being able to work with so many great authors, from the late Prešeren, Cankar, Zajc, Pavček to my contemporaries – Peter Svetina, my wife... Working with these great writers has provided me with the opportunity to grow as an artist. Nowadays, that's not something you can take for granted... It's a blessing, loath as I am to sound melodramatic.

I owe them my responsibility as well. Lucija and I spend a lot of time discussing things – while we're making jam, preparing lunch... I let myself interfere with the text more often with her. We're currently working on the story of the Argonauts, and our picture book *Na otoku zakladov* (On the Treasure Island) was recently published. It's crucial that each and every word has its place, so that not a single one can be added or taken away, and it's crucial that the illustration supports the text, and the other way around. With constant dialogue, that's possible.

Do you prefer inspiration or discipline?

I find myself beating around the bush sometimes. I think a lot and observe things, waiting for the moment when everything falls into place. And then I charge. It's all very zen-like. My brain is always running. I can never simply call it a day and let go. The lines on the road may become a picture book story. I was working on *Sidro* (The Anchor) for several years. I compile fragments slowly. Everything is important and I keep it all in my head. I'm mulling two books over in my head at the moment. I hate carelessness and things done without consideration. I watch myself like a hawk, making sure I don't fall prey ever to cliché. I'm there and I'm not. I live in paradox.

Gaja Kos: France Prešeren & Damijan Stepančič: Zdravljica/A Toast, electronic media LUD Literatura, <https://www.ludliteratura.si/kritika-komentar/france-preseren-in-damijan-stepancic-zdravljica/>, 4.4.2013.

Some of Prešeren's works have already been illustrated and published in the form of picture books in the past and now the legendary *A Toast* has been added to the collection. If you are one of those citizens, who knows only the seventh stanza by heart, you have a great opportunity to recall the other seven stanzas by reading the picturebook version of *A Toast*. Damijan Stepančič took on the challenge to transform the socially drinking and patriotically encouraging spirit of *A Toast* and turn it into images. He tackled it in a very innovative way, but first let's focus on the "technical" aspects to understand the frame of reference: the author dedicates two paged illustration to each stanza and adds an additional two-paged illustration at the end which functions as some kind of artistic chorus or refrain and could also be interpreted as a transition from the past to the present. The illustrator also designed the book and left nothing to chance: the flaps are decorated with tendrils, leaves and grapes, the title page features Prešeren with a fountain pen in his hand, the font is carefully chosen and the yellowish or beige paper gives the book a vintage look. The book concludes with the presentation of Slovene historical figures that are depicted in the illustrations and some words about *A Toast*. The former is part of Damijan Stepančič's original concept for the book. He captured the essence of the poem in the images of important, more or less known or remembered figures from our history that embody the upstanding, brave, free and creative spirit. The illustrations feature different elements from the Slovene history and culture (e.g. the Vače Situla or *The Sower* by Grohar) as well as the famous Primož Trubar, Edvard Rusjan, Janez Polda, Jože Plečnik, Herman Potočnik Noordung, Srečko Kosovel, Kristina Brenkova, Ida Kravanja, Friderik Irenej Baraga, Rudolf Cvetko, Rudolf Maister, Janez Vajkard Valvasor, Alma Karlin and the baron Žiga Herberstein. The illustrations can even serve as a board for the game of "Who's who?". The inventive concept and approach to the picturebook makes it not only appropriate for young adults but even more so for adults and should definitely be considered by librarians and booksellers in light of this new trend.

