

Biography: Guntis Berelis (1961) was born in Cēsis, Latvia. He is Latvian prose writer and literary critic who studied physics and graduated with a degree in library science from the University of Latvia. One of Latvia's leading literary critics, he is known for his prose-like essay writing style. He has published *A History of Latvian Literature* (1999), a collection of essays about 20th-century national literature. He also runs a blog of literary reviews, studies, and criticism, called "Guntis Berelis Writes: Thoughts on Literature" (berelis.wordpress.com).

Synopsis: The novel *Words Were of No Use* is set in 1913 in the coastal Latvian town of Ventspils, the location used for the filming of the first locally-produced motion picture, *Kur patiesība?* (Where Is the Truth?). Rudolf Tush – a man known for his "hands of gold" and readiness to take on any job – finds himself by chance as part of the film crew. Nurturing a range of well-concealed sinister passions, such as his panache for arson (a reputation earned during the 1905 Revolution, when he reduced manor houses and castles to rubble), he is an obscure addition to the film crew. He is also mute, or rather has rejected speech following a rather foolish encounter with a Russian Cossack patrol in 1905. One night, after an evening of hearty carousing in a local pub and his first encounter with a pornographic film, he accidentally kills a man and is forced to flee. The story then jumps ahead to 1915. With World War I raging, Tush, certainly no patriot or devotee of the Russian Empire, embraces the flames of war as an opportunity for profiteering. Entering active combat in 1916, he finds himself on a battlefield strewn with the corpses of fallen soldiers following a German gas attack. There, he encounters the film crew he had once worked with, scheduled to shoot a film about Armageddon and finding the surrounding battlefields the ideal location for their needs. Tush embarks on a new phase of planning for a lucrative future, but luck turns its back on him once again. A character with a distinctively dark streak, Tush is the epitome of the sort of small- minded, outwardly apolitical individual who eventually paves the way to the war.

Excerpt

War—war's good, Tušs thought to himself, entering Lapovics Tavern and quickly ordering a lunch of rostbratwurst and a bottle of Tannhäuser beer. Would you look at that! The war's barely started, but sausages already cost three cents more than last week! He supposes he should be upset, but at the same time, whether he likes it or not, he feels respect toward the tavern owner. The man's got smarts—he won't let the opportunity pass him up, he knows what's coming. Three cents today, three tomorrow, but in a month, watch—lunch will cost twice as much for a serving that has half the sausage. But people will come anyway, whether there's war or peace, and they'll keep on eating, they won't disappear. He definitely needs to buy cigarettes; the price of those will skyrocket, too. He'll buy enough to fill a bag, keep it in reserve, cigarettes never go bad and they never lose value. Matches, too! Now Tušs kind of regrets not paying attention to the newspapers that printed almost-daily articles on the situation in the Balkans. It all seemed so far away and unimportant, and boring—foreign countries and foreign kaisers jabbing at each other for who knows what reasons. Tušs doesn't care about any of it, but see, that's the source of the muck that's almost ready to explode, right on their front door. Today he'll pick up the *Latest News*, the *Riga Paper* and the *Ventspils Review* and read them cover to cover, so hell at least have an idea of the future.

Yes, war—war is good. War pulls everything into a kind of whirlpool. People get sucked into the eddy and stumble, spin in circles, helpless and in despair. One person's life may stop, while another's does the complete opposite, barreling forward like the wind, time speeds up, and then he's slamming head-first into a wall with such force that he turns to jelly. Nothing makes sense, some people bottom-out immediately, because it's easier, while

others fight back, and even those people are pulled under by the whirlpool, just later. Soldiers battle one-on-one and lay down their lives for God and their kaiser, cannonballs fire from every cannon, fortresses crumble, ships sink—who's going to remember the *Titanic* at that point—the crack of rifles, the whinnying of horses, the singing of swords, the earth and sky collide, you can no longer tell who's friend or foe, only the kaiser can know for sure—the same kaiser whose idiot thugs gallop forth to sacrificethemselves for him. And Jesus walks on water dressed in a telegraphist's tunic, smiling serenely and puffing away on a cigar. The most important thing to do in a war is to know exactly when to let the maelstrom of events to pull you forward, and to not fight it too much, because the whirlpool will always be stronger than you. And afterward, to recognize the moment the whirlpool dies down so you can escape it. If you do that—you'll win. But most importantly—no matter what, don't let them enlist you. Then you'll be put in uniform, given a rifle, and sent to the battlefield. You won't even have time to take in your surroundings before you wake up without an arm, or a leg, or even your head. Tušs never understood the crazy ones who voluntarily enlisted—there were a lot of men like that during the battles against the Japanese who rushed to that part of the world wanting to club those slant-eyed monkeys to death.

So many people get killed in wars and there's so much chaos overall that even the smallest crimes go basically unnoticed. Smart men know how to make it through such events unscathed and reap some benefit from the upheaval, so they have some money for food, or for their wallets. Sensible people don't rush to sacrifice themselves for God and the kaiser, but use the war to their advantage—Tušs was definitely going to be like them. For now he'll sit back quietly and watch, but he'll get back in the saddle in no time.

There will be so many apartments and belongings left unattended or abandoned, when their owners enlist or else flee deeper into Russia! All kinds of things happen in war—

soldiers go through the houses, take what they want, but no soldier's going to lug a gramophone, armoire, or grandfather clock away with him, not to mention carpentry or shoemaker tools, all kinds of pans and Kuznetsov porcelain dishes. The Germans and the Russians will loot in turns, but Tušs will also be there, ensuring himself happiness and livelihood for years and years to come. Who hasn't heard of those who move fast and wind up rich over during a war? Just look back at 1905, when more than one farmer acquired property by secretly looting his neighbors' homes, or even the manor house. And not a single Cossack did anything about it. But it's true that if they caught you, they beat your back to shreds with a ramrod or a whip.

Where there's war, there's a lot of money. And where there's a lot of money, there're probably some leftovers. Even a thresher, regardless of how skillfully it's used, can never collect every last piece of grain—it could be just a few handfuls, but they end up on the ground. And Tušs is among those ready to collect these handfuls. The majority of it will go to the army's quartermasters and the highest-ranking officers, but there will probably be something left over—he doesn't need much, after all. He just has to be careful and know when to stop, but now Tušs was educated and knew that he couldn't rush ahead of everyone else. Although—you couldn't get lost in your thoughts because then you won't realize once you've hit rock bottom. It all depends on the powers that be—he may even get his own apartment. And maybe set up a little cinema. By now Tušs was well aware that it didn't take a genius to set up—get a projector, change the reels, turn the crank, make sure the light bulbs don't burn out, and make a bit of cash. Though maybe he should give up the single life and find himself a rich widow? With a nice-sized apartment or, even better, a little house somewhere in either the Pārdaugava or MaskavasForštate neighborhood. There'll be a lot of widows cropping up during the war, someone will have to comfort them—and

what's wrong with Tušs? He's better than a lot of other guys who, idiots that they are, throw themselves onto the Germans' bayonets.

Lost in his thoughts, Tušs didn't even notice he had finished his rostbratwurst and emptied the bottle of beer. Times of chaos really are good times—he'd been sure of that since '05. Well, of course, things were tough in '05, too. There were times when he was ready to give up and find a more peaceful place to wait out the insanity, but back then Tušs had still been young and a bit stupid, and as a result did a lot of idiotic things and rarely acted like a sensible man should act. And yet, whichever way you sliced it, '05 had been a damn beautiful year. He'd seen and experienced so many things. When else had you been able to club a soldier across the back? And the *gorodovoi*he, Luka, and Bernehards beat up by the Rodenburg ditch? The policeman had reached for his sardine of a blade, thinking the metallic glint of the sword would send them, three rash kids, running for their lives. But apparently he hadn't grasped the gravity of the situation, didn't understand that times had changed—and then they kicked the shit out of him to the point the man was left writhing on the ground, holding his stomach. This little victory went to Koļešnikovs's head, he thought it would be a good idea to take the *gorodovoi's* revolver, but thankfully the holster was empty, except for the red rope hanging down the side. It was only later that they heard rumors that the police didn't have that many revolvers—there weren't enough to go around. It's laughable—the socialists show off with their Brownings and Mausers, but the police had no other choice but to hide in the bushes. Another night the three of them had jumped a Russian peddler, who had just arrived from the Vitebska province. They turned his pockets inside-out and found so much money that they cracked up, then left the guy a few rubles for the return trip, and even left him his watch so he wouldn't miss his train. You couldn't do things like that in times of peace. Had anyone tried to arrest them? Of course

not—the *gorodovoi* and *gendarmes* arrested socialists and bombers, the Cossacks and dragoons beat revolutionaries and thugs, but Tušs, Koļesņikovs, and Ķēviets went unacknowledged.

Tušs ordered another Tannhäuser and kept floating in pleasant memories. Right, and all the vodka that flowed freely in '05. He had never consumed as much vodka as he did then, and for free at that. When the socialists set fire to the distillery near Baloži, bellowing their songs and handing out flyers—"Addiction—the Plague of the Working Class," they snuck in from the other side before the fire engulfed the entire building and stuffed their pockets with as many bottles as they could—there was enough for them, and for everyone else. Afterward Tušs stood at the edge of the forest, hidden by the trees, and watched for a long time as the fire licked higher and higher toward the heavens, how the roof finally crashed in, sending bright clouds of sparks into the sky. Almost like fireworks in honor of the kaiser. It goes without saying, he felt irritated over all the vodka going to waste because of these so-called socialists; but even so, the sight was so powerful that he was left breathless, his heart pounding in his throat. This view was worth forgiving the socialists their arson and the vodka being dumped into the ditches. Let them dump it, they won't get all of it—Tušs would have his stash. And it wasn't even worth talking about the women then—in '05 the women threw themselves at men like they were possessed, just take your pick. That period of chaos had gotten to him as well, clouded his judgment, he felt no shame. But back then Tušs was dating a woman who sold herring, he felt like a man of honor, so he only slipped up a few times. Later he did regret letting so many opportunities pass him by, but he consoled himself with the fact that, no matter how big a stud he was, he wouldn't take the whole world for a ride anyway.

But words can be poisonous and can cloud your judgment worst than vodka or the period of chaos. The same with Bernehards Ķēviets, who, after reading all kinds of flyers and brochures, was glued to the socialists their new world order, and talked about nothing else. Tušs and Luka frequently made fun of him and teased him, and even Ķēviets would laugh and read aloud to them: "A socialist is a man of the future, a person of the highest morality, stranger to weakness and vice. It is forbidden for a socialist to smoke, drink, or play cards. He has no right to seduce or jilt women. It is forbidden for a socialist to believe in God, to break promises, and to live in excess while others suffer starvation." Ķēviets smoked, of course, and drank enough for five people, and slept with women right and left, and played enough cards to make the table shake—what kind of socialist did that make him? And yet he walked around with his flyers, went to gatherings and meetings and tried to rope his friends in as well. It almost even worked—Ķēviets talked, talked, and talked, until Tušs and Luka finally went with him to Dundaga, where Ķēviets was from. That was in late autumn of '05, when the Kuznetzov factories were on strike; Tušs had nothing else to do and his wallet was empty, so he let himself get talked into going. It ended up being an insane time, but later he didn't regret his spur of the moment decision. Ķēviets was good acquaintances with Fricis Dancigers, the teacher from Neveja. Dancigers was the same guy who had shot Šmits, assistant to the Ventspils chief of police, on the highway on Midsummer's Eve of '05, and who had then joined the socialists—and so Tušs wound up involved in his activities. Even today Tušs can remember how Dancigers would shout: "Let every *gorodovoi*, spy, bailiff, and governor fall victim to our bullets and stones. We have to eliminate them, wipe these monsters off the face of the earth!"

Later Tušs would shake his head when he thought of the clergyman whose long, dark robe they stripped from him and tossed into the manure pile in the back of the parsonage

barn; the clergyman they chased around the yard with birch branches. Man, how his legs trembled! He couldn't imagine how such a clean-shaven pastor could have legs as hairy and crooked like a Russian Cossack. The man should be glad he made it out as easily as he did—later the socialists would shoot those hypocrites dead without a word, and better if it was just the pastor and not his wife as well, like with Cimmermanis from Lielvārde. But crazy Dancīgers was already prepared for that, endlessly repeating that parsonages were inventions of the Devil himself; Ķēviets and at one point even Tušs had listened to this rant, jaws dropped, because Dancīgers was an educated man, and older than them. Then there was that fat daughter of one pastor who, when they tore open the parsonage window and started climbing in, started frantically waving her arms around, screeching at them to mind the flower pots she had sitting on the windowsill! She took the pots down herself so they could get in, because the clergyman refused to open the front door. But they didn't do too much damage that time—left the clergyman with a few lumps on his head and burned the hymnals and the bookshelves in a heap in the orchard. Ķēviets rummaged through the kitchen, smashing some porcelain tureens. In his crazed state, Tušs wanted to set flame to the church's bell tower, because he'd once heard that church bells would ring on their own accord in a fire, ringing like it was Judgment Day; thank god the others talked him out of it. If the Cossacks or dragoons were to show up, they'd be done for; those guys go crazy over churches. It doesn't matter that their religions were different, or that the pastor was German—for a church they'd tan the hides of everyone, guilty or not. It was better to burn down a manor house, it was a smaller offense. Now Tušs understood that they'd been right, but at the time it felt like '05 would last forever, the fun would never stop and there would always be another pristine distillery or pastor's daughter whose skirt you could pull up and tie around her head so she'd run around banging into every corner.

He hung around Dundaga until the beginning of December, even got to experience the burning-down of the Dundaga Palace. The palace was empty because, after the shooting of Šmits, Baron Osten-Sacken had fled to Germany, leaving some local guy name Prēdiks to stay on as the watchman. Tušs never understood if that was the guy's first or last name—it was always just Prēdiks and Prēdiks, simple as that. Prēdiks was the one who let the arsonists in. Tušs honestly had no idea that something like that had been planned—he just went with the others because he didn't have anything better to do. He thought he might be able to steal some silverware, or take some of the Baron's food, if there was anything left—nothing more. At first there weren't that many of them, a little more than ten people, who entered the palace and wandered aimlessly through the rooms. Tušs and Luka ran into a kitchen maid, who served them some of the Baron's coffee; meanwhile the socialists were doing their thing—shattering furniture into pieces and piling it up, topping it all with paintings of former barons and baronesses with pale faces, tearing curtains from the windows, pulling clothes from wardrobes, ripping pages from books—because first they had to build a burning-pile in each room, otherwise there was no way in hell the stone palace would burn. A few of the men were quite experienced, some having participated in the burning of three, the others five manor houses or palaces, so they knew the fire had to reach the wooden beams between floors in order for the entire structure to come down blazing. Others raided the basement for an armory or a safe, but all they found were dusty wine bottles, which had probably been left in some dark, forgotten corner. True, they did end up finding a safe, which they broke open, but it was no surprise when they found it was empty. Prēdiks led the way and showed them everything, but not even he knew where the baron kept his guns; maybe he took them with him to Germany. Then they brought in the large canisters of gasoline—there was a store right by City Hall, so they didn't have far to go;

they flooded the tower rooms with gasoline. True, a few fast-acting farmers had come into some property by burning down a manor house, but right then Tušs wasn't interested in property. Sure, if he found a wallet in one of the wardrobes, he'd take it—of course he would, but the only souvenir he took from the Dundaga Palace was a long-stemmed porcelain pipe decorated with a blue pattern. But it wasn't really practical—Tušs fell asleep once while smoking it in bed, the bowl resting on his stomach; he didn't even feel it when he rolled over onto it in his sleep, breaking the stem.

Tušs didn't believe it would be that easy to burn down a three-story palace. But the men knew what they were doing; from the barn they brought in long pieces of dry firewood that were meant for the baron's tile stove. They stacked the firewood against the outside of the palace, doused it with gasoline; others still threw more furniture out the windows, along with more clothes, and mattresses, saying they'd come back for them later, but the socialists didn't let them and put everyone to work. There are enough barons with enough things to go around for the poor, they said. Then they laughed as recalled how Baron von Rosen from Straupe had willingly bought back his own furniture and belongings from his servants, who had looted his palace before burning it down. Well, Tušs had been young and dumb; it goes without saying that had he been more clued-in, he wouldn't be bumming around the world today without a dime.

God only knows who lit the match, but all of a sudden the men were spilling one after the other out of the palace tower. Tušs didn't understand what was going on, because he'd just thought of going into the carriage house and greenhouse to look for any tools to take along, but then suddenly flames exploded from the windows on the first and second floors as if a bomb had been detonated, then licking up the tower wall. Then men stood around,

some silent, others loudly and incoherently shouting, swigging wine straight from the baron's bottles, the fire raged on, everything reeked of gasoline and burning rags, and Tušs stood still, his back against the carriage house. Flames shooting up to meet the heavens, you can't compare them to anything else, it's even better than fucking. He forgot to breathe, it was like his body was frozen, so Tušs just stood and watched. After a while the flames seemed to die down a bit—the gasoline must've burned up, but then the fire reached the wooden paneling inside the walls, the ceilings, and beams. There was a massive amount of lumber built into a palace like that. But the best part started once the fire reached the very roof of the tower. The Dundaga Palace tower wasn't particularly tall, but it obviously couldn't be compared to setting fire to a haystack. Even though it was a cold December night, the fire emitted such great heat that Tušs unbuttoned his coat, then his jacket, and let the burning palace warm him—entirely, to the bone. He who is warmed through by fire will be free from gout, Tušs had thought, and a fire like this is better than a sauna. It was already growing dark, the roof of the tower was glowing from the inside, then finally caught fire, and the flames flew up higher than the tower. Now do you understand what it is—beauty and grace? It must've been Pastor Dancigers who said that in Tērbata. Yes, Tušs understood now, what he saw took his breath away, which is why he stayed watching even after everyone else had gone home. The flames snaked through the Dundaga Palace through the following day and into evening, then stood smoldering until the snow smothered the final embers. He liked fires, actually, better than the cinema even, but it was too bad he didn't get to see them that often. But taking part in burning down a baron's palace—that had been worthwhile.

It was nearing the second morning when he finally left. Luka and Ķēviets, who had been sitting at home in front of a bottle of vodka, looked at him like he'd lost his mind. They

thought he'd shacked up with some country girl along the way, or that he'd been crushed by one of the walls in the palace fire. But Tušs could speak only after he'd taken a drink, which only slaked his parched throat and jump-started his tongue—shivers kept running up and down his spine, but they were pleasant shivers. On the way home he had seen a kind of glow in the night sky; later he found out it had been the neighboring manor house burning down. Even later an acquaintance had bragged that he'd seen four manor houses burning down in a single night.