

Biography: Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962), one of the most well-known Latvian authors of psychological prose. left a lasting mark on every literary genre imaginable, though in the present day he is mostly remembered for his skilful portrayals of country life. Past and present critics have also remarked on Jaunsudrabiņš' realistic approach to describing people and his use of vibrant and picturesque "popular language".

Synopsis: Trilogy *Aija* follows the life of a man named Jānis. In the first novel, he is a fifteen-year-old servant boy working as a cowherd at a wealthy farm, who falls in love with the slightly older Aija, a maid at the main house. Aija flirts with Jānis but is more interested in an advantageous marriage than in this cowherd's love and marries a wealthy, middle-aged cobbler. Jānis is crushed and sets out for Rīga, where he works in various factories so that – in the second part of the trilogy – he is able to return to his childhood home by the time he is thirty, to help out on the farm. Jānis falls in love with Ieva, who was just a little girl in the first book but has grown into a beautiful young woman and is also working as a maid. Jānis tries to use this new love to get over his earlier infatuation with Aija, whose husband has since died. He is not successful, and is thrown into an existential crisis, though this crisis is ultimately resolved when Jānis marries Aija. The final volume of the trilogy focuses on their life together and reveals that Aija isn't even close to being the woman he had envisioned. She is a pragmatic egotist who is also disloyal and lazy, but Jānis is unable to leave her. This makes his life even more miserable than it was before his marriage, when Aija was constantly on his mind. And so, because of this, he commits suicide at the end of the novel.

Excerpt

It's impossible to recall how many times I've covered that long distance from Jaunjelgava to the border with Lithuania. I have walked that route by day, with the sun bearing down, drying your mouth to such an extent that you are left gasping for air. I have walked it in

wintertime when, early on, day passes you into the hands of the long, infinitely wide night; when the expanse of snow and pale forests surround you like an alien world; when the stars glitter and a new or waning moon lies in the blue distance like a golden horseshoe. I've walked through thundery nights when flashes of lightening cross the sky, darting through the air, illuminating the road with a bluish-pink light. As I approach the end of the road, I am always exhausted, afraid to take a moment's rest on the roadside unless I am unable to get up again. Sometimes I would be overtaken by a half-empty, horse-drawn cart; the driver would no doubt willingly have given me a ride if he knew how tired I was and yet, whenever I heard the rumble of a cart coming up behind me, I would always put a spring in my step and sometimes even whistle a tune. It's not as if I'm any wiser nowadays. This summer, as I covered the same route, I happened to have an odd travelling companion. I left Jelgaviņa shortly before dawn one Saturday evening. The day was hot, making it a real treat to walk beneath the tall trees and bushes as they threw long shadows across the road. I had only done about fourteen miles when night fell; the darkness was greeted with pink, rippling clouds rising on the morning side and, soon after, dusk descended, covering the red-rimmed clouds.

It was just then, fourteen miles into my walk, that I heard a quiet muttering. I grew uneasy; having read and heard stories about madmen crossing your path when out walking at night. I was unarmed but for a heavy stick of birch. I moved onto the other side of the road, believing the muttering to come from the side I was on. With the road between us, I would have more time to act should I need to. More chance of escape. Reaching the other side of the road, I walked lightly on the grass to get past the stranger. Even if he wasn't a rogue of some sort, it would be uncomfortable walking such a long distance alongside a stranger,

especially at night time when I enjoyed being immersed in my own mist of thoughts. As I drew nearer, I saw a stooping, dark blur to one side of the ditch. The black blur was growling.

'And that little perch would swim inside it...!' I had heard that song somewhere before. It was a drunkard's song, wishing for our land to be a lake of schnapps. I thought I could get past him unnoticed when the black blur swayed, exclaiming,

'Hey there, friend or foe?'

'That depends!' I said tersely, gripping my stick firmly and coming to a stop.

'Draw closer, my friend! Do you have far to go?'

Remaining where I was on the other side of the road, I declared I still had a long way to go. He replied that, seeing as we were both headed in the same direction, we could jaunt along together for about forty miles. He had arranged to be picked up but, damn them, the bloody scoundrels had never shown up. He had searched high and low for them but nothing doing; he had searched in all the cart stables in Jegavina to no avail. And so, he had been forced to get his new shoes soaked in the dew. But what did musicians know about keeping obligations? Seeing that I had no intention of drawing any closer, the stranger roared at the top of his lungs, 'Why are you standing there like a fool? Come on, let's have a drink, it'll put hairs on your chest! We won't get home before sunrise anyhow.' Being from the Upper Courland, I'm not intimidated by such familiarity but all the same, I wasn't much enamoured by this manner of speech from a city man's mouth. It was why I took care being formal and polite when speaking to him. And it worked. As time went by, he grew extremely polite and the night flew by as the forty miles passed beneath our feet, with the stranger telling me this and that about his life. Not wishing the drunk stranger to shout at me again in the dark,

I moved over to his side of the road, held out my hand to shake his and sat down at his side.

Then he wanted to know my name.

'Jānis' I said.

'Ha!' The stranger almost tipped over backwards then leant forward and tapped the bottom of the bottle on the ground. 'Then we are namesakes. Have a drink, Jānis!'

There was nothing left in the bottle. I put it to my lips and said,

'It's empty!'

'That's very good then: when you drink, you drink, when you work, you work!'

Jānis shoved the empty half-litre bottle into his pocket and we got up to continue walking.

While sitting there, I had tried to peer into his face to work out how old he was and what he looked like, but it was too dark to see. All I could make out was a black moustache and a hat of the same colour. By the sound of his voice, I would have said he was around forty, maybe a little older, although later as we were walking along, the way he leapt over the ditches made me think he was quite a boy, maybe even younger than me.

After walking for some time, Jānis started to complain that he was thirsty. I said it wouldn't be long before we reached the tavern where he could down as much beer, fruit squash or kvass as he wanted. But there, not far from the road, was a house. Against the pale, heavy sky we noticed a dark roof with two chimneys and a tall well-sweep off to one side. By this time, Jānis' mouth was so dry he could barely speak. He jumped like a hare over the wide ditch, encouraging me to do the same. As I was quite thirsty, too, we both picked our way across the potato field, then the cabbage patch and across areas of rough grass until at last we reached the well in the middle of the courtyard. We didn't speak a word on our way there, so as not to disturb the dogs. But then, the well sweep made such a racket that the

dogs over by the barn started howling before bounding towards us, like great, shaggy bears.

Putting my back into working the well sweep so Jānis could quench his thirst, I didn't get a drop of water myself and Jānis' head was still inside the bucket when a white-haired man came out of the house, waving his arms and telling us coarsely to be on our way. Without waiting to explain ourselves, we scarpered back to the road, the dogs following us with cabbages crunching beneath their paws. By then, the man had worked himself up into a lather, yelling and cursing after us.

'Thieves! Just you wait! I'll shoot!' he screamed. But we had seen him waving both arms freely when he had emerged from the building, so had no fear of that.

When we were back on the road, Jānis bent down to check his shoes, sighing as he did so. The cold water from the well seemed to have washed away his tipsy daze. The house murmured and the dogs barked. Women's voices could be heard, by now further off behind us.

'Did you see what was in front of the barn we went past?' Jānis asked me furtively.

What I thought I had seen was someone sitting there, a woman in a grey headscarf; but so still she seemed to be frozen. I must have been mistaken.

'It must have been Anna or Minna or Māra sitting there in front of the barn. Oh, I'm very familiar with that old trick. When the heat gets too much to take in the barn ... Anyhow, there's no falling asleep when that happens. She's waiting for her young man while he, in the meantime, may be out with some other Līzes or Dārtas. Oh yes, I know that old trick. When you've been in love with someone for the longest time and then you don't even want to bump into them. Reason and convenience get in the way, destroying all the dreams. And it's still only midsummer. Just wait for the autumn to come and then you'll see, that grey girl

won't be sitting there any longer as still as stone. When I was still out herding cattle, must have been about fifteen at the time, it was as if our house was under some sort of spell all summer. I went quite mad with it, too. Then the autumn came along and as the fog came in, everything else cleared.'

Jānis then moved on to tell me about the man he used to work for, as a farmhand in his household, but mainly about his loved one. Although his story evolved rather incoherently and it took an enormous effort on my part to make much sense of it, as I have already said, those forty miles were covered almost without my realising it. Indeed, getting into the spirit of walking with a travelling companion, I was quite forlorn when the time came to part. I'm not certain that I have given the story the most apt title, but Jānis' tale went something like this:

I have always loved girls, ever since my earliest days. If there were no girls in the game, playing would give me no pleasure at all. When I started school and learned to write, I immediately turned my hand to penning love letters. I had already had many girlfriends by the time I was confirmed.

But there was one girl at school I never dared write to, although I liked her best of all. She was a year or two older than me, very beautiful and gifted, the daughter of farmhands in a wealthy household. Her name alone was enough to make you fall in love with her. But could I dare set my cap at her? I was nothing but the son of a poor servant with nothing but strips of leather bound around my feet as shoes, in the peasant style, a black neckerchief and the elbows and knees of my clothes covered in patches ... No, I couldn't write to Aija. She may very well have taken offence and complained about me to the teacher. And so, I wrote letters to other girls whilst all the time, deep down, thinking only of Aija. Both in class and

outside of school, I always knew where I might catch sight of her.

On Mondays, Aija always had dried peas in her pockets; a pocket full of peas. She was generous and always shared them with the other girls and boys who crowded round her. Sitting apart from the rest, I was always amazed that she could bear to share such a treat with the others, right down to the last pea. Her generosity made me esteem her even more and yet I started saying mean things about her. When the other boys would talk about the girls, saying who was the prettiest, and that was generally agreed to be Aija, I would disagree. I would say that she was too big, too plump for her age, her eyes were too small and her cheeks too chubby. I would criticize her so harshly that I would make myself feel quite sick. The other boys might have noticed, working out for themselves that my feelings were the opposite of those I expressed.

But then, a strange thing happened. The secret hope I had been nurturing all winter came true: my father had come to an agreement with the Liepas that I would go and work for them as a cow herd. It was the house where Aija lived. The arrangement had been made in the tavern one Wednesday evening and, the following morning, a Thursday, Aija told me about it herself. It was the first time she had ever spoken to me, and so sweetly that I went as red as a lobster. I was mortified, angry too, at the thought of all those times I had said such horrible things about this lovely girl. But what upset me more was my blushing, as witnessed by my classmates; the same ones that had heard me being so unkind about Aija whose voice and words had just embarrassed me so.

'So, Balodis, I hear you are to take my place,' she said, when we met at the drinking bucket by the well. I was puzzled.

'Your father has given you to our master as cow herd.'

I suddenly understood what she was saying and was filled with a rush of happiness. Holding the cup out to her, I said,

'It must be easy enough to herd the cows ...'

'Very much so,' Aija said, after drinking. 'They are all fenced in and the pasture is full of hazelnuts and berries. You'll be well fed by the mistress of the house, not to mention the fish and crayfish in the river.'

Aija turned and went back to class. I followed, almost leaping in excitement.

Sitting back down, I glanced over at the girls where my eyes locked with Aija's, the look in them burning into me like a flame. From that moment on, all my thoughts were about her; obsessive and honeyed. Thoughts of Aija interfered with stories from the Bible, catechism, geography. I also managed to bump into her more often – by the drinking water, in the stairwell, in the courtyard. Once I asked her,

'And will you go on living there yourself?'

'Where else would I go? I'm going to be their maid, after all,' she replied, a little haughtily.

I felt put down by her "after all", as if she meant I was to be nothing more than a cow herd, needing no more than a bunk to sleep in at night with sweaty feet and sleep-filled eyes. But Aija hadn't meant any harm; instead she had only been bragging a little that, at the tender age of sixteen, she was about to take on the adult duties of a maid. No, she hadn't meant it as a put-down – I was sure that was never her intention, if it had been she would simply have ignored me. Her behaviour towards me was quite the opposite in fact, treating me as a member of the household. Whenever she had roasted peas rattling in her pocket, she would give me a handful without me even asking. She would just come over and say,

'Open your hands!'

Once, she even brought some hazelnuts to school that she had picked herself then stored away almost until spring. As soon as the other children realised what she had, they crowded round her, shoving and shrieking. And yet she kept six whole hazelnuts back for me. Some of the older boys got the same amount but mine were much plumper. Then, as Aija said good bye along with the other girls who were going to be confirmed, she took me by the hand and said,

‘See you when I get back then in a couple of weeks, you’ll be at our place!’

I looked around, checking whether any of my schoolmates had seen or heard.

II

I then plunged into long days filled with dark yearning and an unprecedented sadness. For days on end, I wandered about like a man possessed from the moment I woke, unable to sleep at night or truly wake during the day. The teachers were puzzled, failing to understand why one of their most hard-working pupils was unable to concentrate on his studies. No one knew that it was all down to Aija. I couldn’t care less about turning into a fool, not if I was doing it for her.

After a long, painful wait, a week had finally gone by. I hadn’t seen Aija for a whole week! I had such a long time to wait until I would see her again – too long. It was March by then, and still twenty-two days of April to go! No, I had to do something to shorten the wait. I reasoned that my father’s sister lived up at the manor house and, in the past, I used to go and visit the children that lived there. I could go that coming Saturday.

The weather was warm and pleasant. I would have to walk past the Lapas and, with any luck, Aija might come out into the courtyard or to the front door and exchange a few words

with me. Or better still, I might meet her coming out of the pastor's house which was not far from the big manor.

As we walked up to the Lapas, the other children seemed to be going at an intolerably slow pace. As we drew closer to the Lapas, I stared in at the smooth central courtyard but not a soul was to be seen. Smoke curled out of the chimney. Dogs ran out of the gates, barking at us. Aija might not be back yet, if she were, she would surely have looked out of the window. We walked on, chattering noisily, the girls in front of us. Fighting the dogs off, I lagged behind to see if I could catch a glimpse of Aija. If she was at home, why didn't she come out to fetch some firewood or draw some water from the well?

I slowed my walking pace, concerned that we would pass the pastor's house before the girls preparing for their confirmation had come out. If we kept going at this speed, we would cover those three miles in no time at all. I started calling the other boys' attention to various distractions along the roadside or up in the sky. The girls, having run away from the Lapas dogs, were already quite a way up ahead. Now, I grabbed the sleeve of the boy closest to me, saying,

'Listen – is that a skylark singing?'

And we stopped, holding our breath, our mouths open, listening and staring up into the slightly smoky, spring air.

'Of course it isn't!' one of the boys exclaimed. 'Have we ever heard a skylark before?'

And so began a long discussion about whether skylarks migrated to warmer climes or whether they stayed right there all winter, along with the sparrows. I enjoyed the conversation and was careful to take as tiny and as few steps as possible. I told them in detail exactly when and where my father had seen skylarks around New Year. Someone said

we needed to hurry up or the girls would have already reached home.

'You've got nothing but girls on the brain!' I replied.

The boy blushed, mumbled something and slowed down his pace.

There was only a mile, maybe even less, left to go. I bent down over a pile of gravel and started poking about in the dry sand.

'There's no chalk in there,' one of the boys said.

'You never know, I might find a little bit.'

No, the boys weren't going to wait for me or I was going to scabble about, looking for goodness knows what. They carried on walking. I had no choice but to follow them.

By then we were up at the crossroads and the turning for the pastor's house. There was no one about apart from a bent old man; other than him, not a living soul was to be seen.

'Oh no! What have I done? Where are my books? Goodness, I've left them at school! I put them next to my parcel of bread and forgot all about them. What am I going to do now?

The boys were puzzled. Nearly all of them had seen me carrying them under my arm. They had noticed I hadn't thrown pebbles at the dogs, as I should have done, because I had them clutched beneath my arm.

'Books aren't birds,' I said, raising both hands in the air.

'Well you had them before so you must have them now,' someone said. Others were ready to chip in, too. One of them promised to lend me his – he would study that day then lend me his books the next – I could keep them as long as needed, all day if necessary. Besides, they could pop back to school tomorrow evening and they would still have all evening and Monday morning to study.

But nothing they said persuaded me to take a step further. The room where I had left my

books was unlocked – who knew who might go in there. The world is such an evil place. It would be virtually impossible for me to buy new books if anything happened to them, unlike some of the boys who were trying to convince me it didn't matter.

'I'll wait for that old man, and then we will walk back together,' I said, sitting down on a pile of gravel. My companions called me names and left.

The old man came crawling up to me like a beetle. It was hard to tell if he was coming towards me or going away. Whatever was glistening beneath his black sheepskin hat may have been a white beard or hair, it was hard to tell. All the same, he appeared to be progressing in my direction. But could I wait for him? Did I really need to? When the boys had disappeared behind the outhouses of the manor house, I got up and left. What could the old man tell me? He might very well just be passing by the pastor's house by. If he was a beggar, he would have been given a sandwich in the kitchen then sent on his way – he wouldn't have taken any interest in the children doing their confirmation class. It was more than likely that Aija had gone home ages ago. I quickened my pace. As I got to the pile of gravel where I had looked for colourful pebbles, I stopped, wanting to look back towards the manor house to make sure they were not hiding somewhere out of the wind, watching me. There was no one on the road; just the old man, shuffling slowly with crooked legs towards the pastors' house. I quickly dug out my books and increased my pace. The dense membrane above my head grew thicker and greyer. Darkness was already looming when I got to the Lapas. The chimney was still smoking. There was a fat lady standing in the middle of the courtyard, looking at the road. The dogs barked but I didn't chase them away and they soon stopped. Was it, perhaps, the mistress of the house where I was soon to start working? Probably, since serving women don't have time to stand around like that. She

must have known who I was, otherwise why would she be staring so intensely at a young boy? If she knew me, Aija must have seen me and told her that I was to be their cow herd. Oh, the agonies of being just a cow herd! Why couldn't I be made a servant? Why couldn't I go there on St George's day, the customary day for moving on to a new master, walking across the fields, following the plough, or walking with a scythe and a rake? Then, Aija would come out with breakfast and lunch for me ... I didn't want to go back and look at the middle of the Lapas courtyard again, yet peered in all the same, seeing that the mistress of the house was no longer there. Here too, the outhouses shielded the main house from view. I stopped. Maybe in autumn I would spend the evenings in this barn. Perhaps Aija and I would separate out the grain on huge scales. Or maybe she would pass sheaves of rye up to me while I stood amongst the stored grain. And then we would bake pies in the oven of the barn ... The dog barked again and I started. What was I doing, standing there like a fool?

The sky grew overcast and it started drizzling warm, grey rain that seemed never ending. At certain points along the coast there was still snow needing to be washed away – the rain would do no harm.

Quite close to the Lapas, the path turned sharply; the turning led straight to my home but instead I had to go back to school. I had left a sack there, holding a dry crust of bread and an empty wooden butter box to be refilled for Monday. It would have been quite another story if I had gone on a visit; then I could have popped home on Monday evening to get some food, but this way was better than a fruitless journey to school the next day.

When I had walked a little further, I saw Aija. She was ambling along the path I would have taken to get home if I hadn't been forced to make this damned detour. But there was nothing to be done about that now. Just imagine, we would have bumped into each other if

only I had noticed her on the path a little earlier. This thought weighed on my heart like a heavy stone. It was so difficult to bear that I moaned out loud and stopped in my tracks. I was unable to take another step.

Aija had just seen off an old woman with a little striped blanket on her shoulders who was now hobbling away through the pine trees without a backward glance. Aija, in the meantime, had seen me and now stood there, staring. She may well have been wondering why I was standing stock still on the hillside.

Aija was separated from me by about a mile. Now, I was able to stand there quite safely and look at her, the stone bearing down on my heart, my eyes moist. Was she aware of any of it? Oh yes, she had already been confirmed while I could only count fifteen summers.

Cow herd! Cow herd!

I truly have no recollection of getting myself back home but I did so, together with my sack and wooden butter box. On that occasion, Mother didn't scold me for wearing out my shoe leather; something she usually did if I walked ten feet more than what was strictly necessary. She had seen me on the road and waved but I hadn't notice. She didn't ask why I had turned back once I had already been half way to call upon them. Her mind was taken up with far more jolly thoughts – she had been to visit the mistress of the house where I was soon to start working, since they had not discussed the question of leather strips and cloth for my feet when they had met previously to come to an agreement. Mother was delighted and started telling me all about it. How she had been welcomed in and served a delicious meal; suckling pig, potatoes, pea and onion savoury balls. Over dinner, all she could talk about was the Lapas and what a wonderful life awaited me there, given that the mistress was so kind and generous.

'Well, the devil always manages to disguise his tail and horns ... We'll have to see what she's really like when he starts there ...' father concluded with indifference.

And Aija, what a lovely girl! She seems to just understand people, as knowing as an adult.

Kissing her hand in farewell, she had seen her on her way, making sure the dogs didn't bark.

Like an orphan, she knew how to get by, how to make herself useful.

I was pleased to hear mother speak so highly of Aija, but didn't let on. When she had said all she had to say about the Lapas, she asked if I would like some more porridge. Putting my spoon down, I shook my head, then said,

'Well, what more can I say? She was very good at school, too.'