

Biography: Anšlavs Eglītis (1906–1993) was a Latvian writer, journalist, and painter. The artistic environment of his family and home life, in addition to his sustained interest in the world of literature and art while growing up, were immensely important to his growth and development as a writer. Eglītis and his contemporaries appeared on the Latvian literary scene in the 1930s, at a transitional time between literary generations. It is interesting to note that the author’s books often contained his own illustrations, drawings, and other graphic design elements. He emigrated to Germany in 1944 and to the United States in 1950, where he became a film critic. Eglītis is rightly referred to as the most prolific Latvian refugee author, with more than 50 books to his name. These are typified by their linguistic expressiveness, urban landscapes, poignant characterisations, sharp irony, and captivating storylines. His novel *Līgavu mednieki* (Bride Hunters; 1940) holds a special and lasting place in Latvian literature and has been recognised by critics as one of the most significant and unique works of its time. His so-called “artist’s novel” *Homo novus* (1946) was also a success. These works are especially meaningful in the history of Latvian literature because of their depictions of cultural life in Rīga and their vibrant range of younger characters, as well as their colourful descriptions of artists and their milieu during this time. The author continued his tradition of precise, fine-grained, detailed character descriptions in the works he wrote later in exile.

Synopsis: *Bride Hunters* was the novel which first brought Anšlavs Eglītis, the giant of Latvian literature, his considerable popularity. Its key qualities include exceptionally witty writing and excellent descriptions of its characters and settings. At the centre of the novel are the different paths taken by three friends – Eplats, Ķurzēns, and Dušeļs – as they struggle to achieve happiness. Eglītis refers to these three fortune-seekers as “bride hunters” because they believe the quickest way to become rich is to marry well. The author gives a wry description of the Latvian elite of the 1930s – shop owners, consuls, bank employees, student fraternity members – and takes the reader through the restaurants and cafés that abounded in Rīga at that time. *Bride Hunters* is a living testament of Rīga, its people, their lives, mores, relationships, ways of thinking, language, approach to life, desires, and longings.

Excerpt

My nostril, nostril is aware

of the scent of a pineapple in the air.

(Jānis Sudrabkalns)

Solemn in its stony grandeur, a lofty five-storey building towered up into the night sky. Mute as a director general who no longer has any need of advertising or recommendation. White moonlight like molten metal poured over the tapering gable ends of slate and the miniature towers, the elaborately branched wind vanes resembling bouquets or coral trees, and the two thickset and stumpy lions that, having turned their backs to each other with tails lifted up high in doglike manner, were guarding the corners of the roof. Flowing over the knobbly railings of the roof, the light scattered like a cascade and glittered on the countless mouldings and sculptures that decorated the facade. Was there anything that hadn't been depicted on this wall! Stylised plants with long nematode-like stalks and leaves hung down over several floors, coiling around the rows of dark blue glazed bricks that adorned the walls here and there in the gaps between the windows. Two full-bodied caryatids, stone female figures garbed only in strangely patterned sashes and shawls draped over their backs, supported the central balcony, offering the viewer the symbols of the fine arts. In between them a puss in boots held a shield in its paws: it bore the inscription of the year 190* on it. Enormous masks of haughty Amazons, sphinxes, wide-mouthed masks representing tragedy and - with a sneer - comedy, lions' snouts with pathetically gaping maws, rams' skulls with spiralled horns, owls, peacocks with fan-shaped tails and a great number of mammals, reptiles and insects turned this facade into a gigantic picture book. Almost every window, or

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at least each row of windows, was of a different shape. The lower ones were round, in the next row they resembled sugar lumps with chopped off corners, in the third row they had rounded, convex edges like protruding stomachs, here in the centre of the building there was also an enormous oval embrasure divided into three sections, shining brightly under the illumination. In the fourth row the windows were square, in the fifth - keyhole shaped, in the sixth they resembled a large letter T, but through them twinkled a starry sky: the sixth row was in the decorative wall that raised the height of the facade one whole storey higher.

Two young men stood in front of the building and, heads thrust back, had already been studying it for a good long while.

"Look at that," said the slighter one, "behold, wild fantasy, the acme of bad taste: the peacocks' tails have enormous plaster rings fastened to them, freely hanging down the wall. That's some style, this old Modern or *Jugendstil* as the Germans call it."

"Two front doors and another building at the back," said the more heavily built of the two, speaking as if to himself. "Six, oh no, five storeys. So that's forty apartments; in this neighbourhood that would bring in 4000 lats a month. Net balance around about 2000, subtract his own apartment and concessions to acquaintances, let's say – 1500 lats."

"Don't get taken in by the front doors, above the entrance to the inner courtyard they link up into a small vestibule and in fact there is only the one stairwell."

"Hmm, the same as with the sixth storey. So that means 10 apartments in each building, 750 lats per month. And you call that income?"

"Don't forget that Surģenieks has a country property in Courland, a model of excellence, almost a manor estate with fish ponds, espaliered and miniature fruit tree orchards that ripen two weeks earlier than ordinary fruit orchards, greenhouses for grapes, medicinal herb plantations, pedigree livestock, bacon pigs. In Majori, moreover, he owns

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two large summerhouses, one let out as serviced accommodation and, most importantly of all, to the director of a major bank – capital and credit, limitless credit."

"Credit? It's not in everyone's hands that credit is transformed into income. More often – into a liability."

"Well, you can certainly rely on Surģenieks' hands."

"Whatever. If Surģenieks had one daughter, I'd call him wealthy, but if he has, as you tell me, two daughters and two sons then he is merely comfortably off, that's not to say: he has enough to eat."

The skin of the speaker's face was the colour and roughness of unbleached Piebalga canvas; stretched over the sharp corners of his cheekbones it was like an antimacassar covering the chair for a guest of honour. Melancholy eyes in deep sockets, thick untidy eyebrows, a substantial pointy nose, square jaw, lips as thin as a knife cut characterised the face of this fanatic – calm, cool, without a smile. His words crackled hard and sharp. He was wearing a thick, moss-coloured country broadcloth coat with a velvet collar that had been made by a clumsy rural tailor, it enveloped his frame like a bale of cotton. On his head he wore a soft black trilby, its glossy texture like velvet.

"Let's go inside then," he said, and both friends pushed open the door of polished glass.

The walls of the stairwell were lined with bricks glazed dark green and red. Fifteen steps led the new arrivals to a low vestibule with a large window that reached right down to the mosaic floor. The eight short, squat columns of the vestibule and ceiling also were richly patterned with a complicated ornamentation of plant motifs – waterlily leaves and blooms, lotus flowers, asphodels, but the capitals of the columns - each one - featured four gilded

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Amazonian masks with vacant stares. The overall tonality of the room was the bluest of blue, so much so that it was strangely reminiscent of a laundry.

Sweeping a casual glance over the vestibule, the friends entered the main stairway and stopped at an elaborately decorated window that gave on to the inner courtyard. Some of the coloured glass panes that had been knocked out had been replaced by plain ones through which the friends looked out into the yard. Not a hint of the grandeur of the façade. Untreated, soot-covered and grubby sandstone brick walls enclosed the yard tightly on all sides. In the corner loomed an enormous cylindrical rubbish bin, similar to the advertising columns on boulevard pavements. It was graced by a pointed roof with scalloped edges and a large pinecone on top. That was the only bit of embellishment that could be glimpsed while peering through the window overlooking the yard.

"For the money that he wasted on decorating the façade Surģenieks could have easily added a third building," said the more broad-shouldered young man and continued climbing the stairs.

On the third floor they stopped at a door with a brass plate engraved with artificially looped writing:

DĀVIDS JONATĀNS SURģENIEKS

The broad-shouldered one grabbed his companion's hand.

"I still feel uncomfortable, nonetheless. I wasn't invited."

"Don't worry. We've got nothing to lose. Besides, they say that the Surģenieks family are very hospitable. After all, it's my first time here as well. Father and I became acquainted with Surģenieks a good month ago in Jūrmala. Apparently the Surģenieks receive visitors on

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Saturdays and Sundays. But it could well happen that he'll have already forgotten, long ago, the son of his primary school classmate and the invitation he made out of courtesy, even more so because I didn't manage to hold the attention of the two young ladies. The elder one – Grizelda – even started making fun of me."

"Well then, let's hope that they do remember. Did you give as good as you got?"

"Didn't have time to."

"So much the worse. Women do not forget slights and do their best to retaliate, but wanting to make up again is the best excuse for making an approach. And here everything will depend on the daughters. Currying favour with the parents only works if there are no sons in the family."

"Well then, with God's help," said the slighter one as he took hold of the ring of the bell pull.

The door opened. A scrawny, black-eyed boy, some fourteen years old, stood in front of them. Boys of this age are rarely handsome but this one was outright ugly. His narrow, dark face seemed as if too small for his large, red, oddly sensuous mouth and deep-set eyes, the corners of which, when observed from the front, seemed to be directly touching the contours of the face. Unusually thick and dark eyebrows lay close above his eyes. He was dressed quite like an adult, in a suit with a modern cut, there was even a pearl in his tie and a chain draped over his waistcoat. Slowly shifting his eyebrows to the centre of his low, half-moon shaped forehead and boldly, even impudently staring at the newly arrived visitors, he asked in a voice that was so sweet that it could almost be regarded as mocking:

"What do the gentlemen require?"

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"The gentlemen, young man," said the slighter one, imitating the boy's sweetness of manner, "wish to speak to Mr Surģeniķs, here are their calling cards," and with a grand gesture he handed over the one card only - his.

The boy did not move.

"Unfortunately, I can only offer the gentlemen Mr Imants Surģeniķs. The others – Mr Dāvids and Visvaldis – are not at home. The said gentleman is at your service," said the boy, bowing with a fixed facial expression.

"Excellent, I am most pleased," said the slighter one, and as he entered into the hallway he gave the boy a handshake, intentionally squeezing the hand very hard, but the boy did not even wince.

"Since Mr Imants Surģeniķs has now so kindly placed himself at our service," continued the slighter one unhurriedly, biding his time so that he could find a way of reaching an understanding with the lad - as it was obvious that he was making fun of them, "we would like to request that you call over Miss Surģeniķs."

"Which one?" asked Imants, without blinking.

"Well, let's say, Grizelda perhaps... Listen, young sir," the slighter one suddenly adopted a paternal, friendly tone, "surely you don't carry a watch on a key chain. This enormous ring is meant for keys," he poked the pocket of the boy's waistcoat with a fine pigskin glove, "and one can spoil the appearance of one's best suit like that."

The boy regarded the speaker with suspicion, took the calling card and made as if to go further inside.

"Imalīn, just what in heaven's name is going on there?" a clear voice rang out loudly and commandingly: and a large, powerful but well-proportioned dark-haired young woman rushed into the hallway. The low, crescent shaped forehead, low straight eyebrows and

large sensuous lips immediately betrayed that she was of Surģenieks' stock. Yet everything that on the boy's face had seemed somewhat unprepossessing, here - inspired and enhanced by the charm of femininity – presented an attractive sight. The moist lips trembled, the large quick-moving eyes were as bold as her brother's, the movements were swift and impetuous; her entire body was as if charged with electricity, each limb, hidden by clothing, vibrated and trembled, leading its own life; her breath lifted up and down the gown over her breast, a skilfully made garment that beautifully highlighted the voluptuousness of her figure.

Both friends bowed without speaking.

"Good afternoon," she said, striking a beautiful pose. Having spotted the moss-coloured plain weave coat of the broad-shouldered visitor she raised her eyebrows quite like her brother. The slighter one hurriedly stepped forwards, throwing open his fashionably long and flashy striped overcoat. The breast of a pristine white dinner jacket gleamed out. Miss Surģenieks' eyebrows settled back down again.

"My esteemed young lady," the slighter one said, "my name is..."

"Pāvils Epalts," read Imalīns loudly from the calling card.

"You guessed it," continued Epalts, "we met each other early last September, in Majori..."

"At Maskote?" Miss Surģenieks enquired without enthusiasm, thrusting out her lower lip and drawing her chin into tiny folds.

"No, only at the front of your summer house; your dear distinguished father met an old school friend..."

Her lips suddenly burst into a smile like a corncob, revealing rounded grains of teeth. But her smile was not of the nicest.

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"Aha, and you are his honourable dear son, the one who was wearing that funny fakir's shirt at the height of the summer heat? I hope that you've got a normal shirt for that dinner jacket..."

"I should have foreseen your abnormal fondness for raillery and worn red so that you would really have something to laugh about. I always seek to pander to ladies."

"You won't get very far like that."

"Let each pursue their own methods, my dear lady. After all, I'm not criticising your own Wild West approach. You can form your opinion about my methods after an hour or two."

"Well, one panderer is already sitting over there, in the reception room. I'm sick and tired of that method."

"Never mind, I shall treat you with homeopathy."

"Are you a women's doctor then?"

"Every man is a women's doctor in his own way."

"Ugh, you are philosophising, That's really very poor indeed. Thinkers are boring Platonists."

"Don't overestimate your knowledge of human beings. A Platonist can only be determined by kissing: they never hit smack on the lips the first time."

"But the second?"

"Who gets to a second time is no longer a Platonist but a determined striver. Ladies love those."

"Strivers? Oh you, you last century idealist!"

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"And yet. With a woman's favours it is like with a doctor's practice: if you don't practice for a few days then your client will be gone with the wind. That's why you can recognise happy lovers from their worn soles."

A whole bevy of young women were now pressing through the doorway.

"Right, then women love strivers, so what kind of women do men love?" asked Miss Surģeniķs.

"Whichever happens to be at hand. Love is a trap that one can rush into in a moment of blindness, but one does not seek a trap, of course, one stumbles across it unawares."

"Then what are you looking for, in this warehouse of traps?" Miss Surģeniķs pointed at her laughing friends in the doorway.

"A good majority of rats exist off the bacon that gets put into traps."

"All right then, take off your coat, I want to see which one you'll fall for first."

"These days it is no longer possible to admit to love. To do it by saying so would be ridiculous, to do it in writing – cowardly, over the telephone – improper."

"You poor thing, then how will you do battle with your passions?"

"They aren't the sort of passions that you can fight against."

Epalts removed his outer garments and pushed forwards his friend who all this time had been standing silent.

"My friend Mārtiņš Ķurzēns."

"From the country?"

"Student economist," said Epalts, as if he had not heard the mocking question.

"Never play cards against him. Already at school he was called Nickel Mārtiņš, but for a long time now he has been known as Silver Mārtiņš."

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"Ergo all that remains is to become Paper Mārītiņš. Well, at least he plays cards. I had already started to think that he was one of those, one of those..."

"One of those?! Look at this face," Epalts cried out.

Indeed, illuminated by the light bulb on the ceiling Ķurzēns' face looked almost horrific. Beneath the enormous, high arched brow and Mongol cheekbones loomed dark shadows. Narrow lips like a black hair curled into a sardonic smirk. Mārītiņš resembled an apostle or an ascetic in the "basement lighting" of a Baroque painting. It was the face that finally convinced Miss Surģenieks. She invited the friends to come inside.

Ķurzēns' suit, bought from a small store on Marijas Street, was not at all new. A keen eye would have noted that the elbows, back and seat of the trousers had been carefully treated with Indian ink, strong tea, soapwort and a steel brush. The shininess had gone, however. Ķurzēns trod across the parquet stiff-legged, as if on ice; when greeting he bent only at the hips, as if on hinges, keeping the upper part of his body rigid and straight.

Epalts strolled about loose-limbed and at ease, he was even a little too relaxed, thumbs hitched in the pockets of his trousers. Had his dinner jacket not been a little too obviously close-fitting and padded, it could have been described as elegant. Epalts' head was like a rhombus resting on its point. A large but nicely-shaped mouth with a faintly downwards-drooping lower lip in his perennially irritating smile revealed uneven teeth, one of which was gold. This smile and the largish, ruddy ears were all that remained in one's memory from an otherwise nondescript face.

Having completed their greetings, the friends retired to one side to take in their surroundings.

"What's the idea, presenting me as a card sharp and embarrassing me?" Ķurzēns growled.

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"What was I supposed to say? That you don't drink, don't smoke, avoid women, study all day long and go to church every Sunday? Then everybody here would avoid you like a leper."

The Surģenieks' apartment was not unlike the façade of the building. Patterned, floral and butterfly covered wallpaper, the ceiling overdecorated with gilt ornamentation and bas reliefs, at the centre of which flitted a plump, visibly crumbling plaster cherub, cheerily waving his bow and golden arrows. The long reception room with the enormous oval window was divided into three parts by arc-shaped wooden partition walls, forming at both ends of the room cosy alcoves with sofas and rugs. The walls gleamed with highly polished oaken panels, on them hung landscapes by Purvītis in light coloured oak frames which did not suit the muted palette of the paintings at all. The mahogany furniture with brass trim echoed something of the so-called style of Nicholas I. One corner was occupied by a huge palm tree. The long-legged leaves with their sharp tips posed a threat to the eyes and the sleekly combed hair of passers-by.

Slumped under the palm tree, a narrow-shouldered youth with sparse reddish hair languished in an armchair. His round, soft, unhealthily pale face was scattered with rare but large freckles. Very light-coloured bluish-grey eyes flickered beneath the colourless eyebrows, the whites of the eyes were yellowing, the eyelids were flushed pink. The nose, snub and fat, looked as if it was crouching down, the lips were full, puffed up, rubbery as snails and the same pallor as the face. His hands were held meekly in his lap but the hairy, knotted fingers were cramped into contortions. The entire being of this human creature expressed a limp helplessness and a weirdly unctuous tenacity at the same time. He was like tough, sinewy meat that one can mangle every which way, but can neither pull apart nor

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chew. The face, as with someone asleep or blind, did not express anything at all, though a closer study of it hinted that the one sitting down saw and heard everything.

Once more the bell rang, but still the new arrivals lingered in the hallway.

"Ganglyleg," Grizelda called out, "take a look and see who's there!"

As if thrown up by a spring, the pale one shot out from the depths of the armchair like a jack-in-a box. Once unfolded, his frame was astonishingly tall and wiry. Without saying a word and walking with the gait of a wobbly leech, his preternaturally long arms hanging down uselessly, he hurried out into the hallway, inhumanly narrow, like Harry Cooper on the screen when viewed from the seats at the sides of the cinema. The cut of his suit and the way that it sat on his frame did, however, possess a certain chic and elegance.

A moment later he appeared at the door and waved to Grizelda, but he did so with a particular, overbearing familiarity, as if reminding her of a secret known only to the two of them. Grizelda pulled a face, nonetheless she got up and went out into the hallway.

"Did you see Atis Dušelis?" Ķurzēns whispered. "Now here we are - the old threesome from school, back together again."

"He doesn't want to acknowledge us at all."

"Scared of competition."

"Let's have a chat with him later. We must stick together. There will be no shortage of adversaries in any case."

The lady of the house herself, Mrs Surģenieks, stout and as big as a monument, walked in together with a new female guest.

Everyone rose to their feet. The men tripped over themselves to bow over the plump, soft hand. Grizelda whispered something in her ear. The lady turned towards the two friends. A smile that had hovered at the corners of her mouth gradually spread over her

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whole broad flabby face like the rings of ripples after a stone has fallen into a pond. Yet the faded half-closed eyes, cold and inscrutable as those of a fish, examined them so intently that they involuntarily shrank. It became instantly obvious from where the Surģenieks family had inherited their penetrating stare.

Slowly, ever so slowly, madam sank down into the sofa, solemn as a queen opening parliament. Her ash-grey hair, tied into an Aspasian knot, was almost the same colour as the greying silken gown, its majestic pleats sank into the wide lap like a valley, forming mighty rounds of knees like giant hummocks; on these rested massive hands with a gold lorgnette set with diamonds held between the fat fingers. The fine, barely discernible but infinitely long chain of the lorgnette hanging around the creased neck was, with the exception of her wedding ring, the only piece of jewellery that the lady wore. When she bent her arm to lift the lorgnette to her greying eyebrows which loomed on her broad visage like withered bushes in fallow, it seemed as though the shiny silk would burst from the huge mass of flesh that was crammed into the sleeve. The size of those biceps would have been the envy of the most robustly built wrestler. Full of proud tranquillity and indescribable gravity, the lady occasionally seemed no longer a human being with proclivities and weaknesses, but rather a symbol of the dignity of the family hearth, an idol, a colossus around whom people dance, to whom people pray, offer sacrifices and burn incense, and who accepts it all without any thanks as the appropriate homage, meanwhile acting according to their own inexorable and unfathomable will. While the lady was present, even the irrepressible Grizelda quietened down.

The one whom the lady honoured by bringing into the gathering was Iriša Majore, the only child of Majors, the well-known merchant and Consul of Nicaragua and Liberia; she was a fair-skinned, petite redhead in showily expensive attire, wearing an unusual spiky

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necklace and holding a handbag of peculiar form and material in her hand. She was at that fateful borderline where freshness needs to be gradually replaced by elegance.

The arrival of both ladies completely changed the atmosphere in the room. All faces now exhibited honeyed smiles. The calling out to each other across the room ceased. The only thing that could be heard were subdued voices: please, thank you, may I, would you care for, my esteemed lady, my dear miss... Epalts sat down with the group of ladies surrounding the lady of the house. Ķurzēns froze behind Miss Majore's chair. On seeing this, Dušelis' glazed face relaxed a tiny bit; he slid over to Grizelda quite as smoothly as a grass snake.

Once more the bell rang, but this time it did not stop ringing.

"Oh, Visvaldis is being naughty again," madam said, "Grizelda dear, my spiky little Thistle, let him in, do."

But the hallway was already a seething mass, and a moment later a mob of youths invaded the reception room – they were students of the commercial school bearing the insignia of their fraternity Kubezele. Each wore a brocade cap, a massive ring with the coat of arms of the organisation and, of course, a wide ribbon across the chest, only it was not multicoloured but made of pure gold cloth which is why those who had earned their insignia were known as 'gold-bearers'.

"Visvaldi, my dear, why are you fooling about!" his mother said with a trace of irritation, but the icy, all-encompassing stare had become inexpressibly gentle and warm. Visvaldis kissed his mother on the cheek.

"You've been drinking again," she said sadly.

"Just one little glass. But listen, I'm going to announce to you something completely droll: listen and wonder – I'm hungry."

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The lady swept a happy glance over the gathering, bursting into genuine heartfelt laughter as if her son had just told the most colossally amusing joke.

"It was only you that we've been waiting for. Gentlemen, ladies, come to the table please."

Visvaldis was strikingly handsome. Tall, slim yet broad-shouldered and of manly bearing, lithe as a whip handle, with enviably easy and unaffected manner. His hair, slightly wavy, glistened black as tar. A straight forehead, aquiline nose and pronounced, long chin created a masculine, firm, well-defined profile with perfectly proportioned lines. Even the bluish haze of the stubble on his cheeks seemed exquisite and in masculine contrast to the cool, fresh pinkness of his face. On Visvaldis the low, straight eyebrows characteristic of the Surģenieks family flowed into one sharply delineated black stripe over the eyes, making them flash particularly expressively, ardently, commandingly. It was difficult to resist this gaze. Visvaldis smiled at the girls like old girlfriends with whom he was linked by shared happy memories. His behaviour towards them was unceremonious, but quite different to that of Dušelis: fascinatingly congenial, friendly, like an older brother and lover at the same time. He spoke little, with few words, making up for it with gestures, waves of the hand, and his white toothed smile.