

Biography: Prose writer Gunars Janovskis (1916–2000) was born in Helsinki to the family of a captain serving in the navy of the Russian Empire. Janovskis and his family returned to Latvia in 1919, and Janovskis spent his childhood near the sea and on fishing trips with his father. He began his studies in classical philology at the University of Latvia before fleeing to Germany in the autumn of 1944. Immediately after the end of the war, he resumed his studies at the University of Bonn in Germany. In 1947, he moved to the United Kingdom and initially became a manual labourer, working as a field hand and at a brick-kiln. Janovskis is considered one of Latvia’s best prose writers. During his life, he wrote more than 30 novels. Most of his work focuses on life as a refugee and relationships between Latvians in the refugee community. In many of his works, the author also includes details from his own life, giving his stories a somewhat autobiographical feel. Janovskis was a true master of the form and his novels contain all that is characteristic of this type of prose: passion, adventure, resignation to one’s fate. Some of his novels contain more exotic elements, while others focus on everyday life and the events of his time. The reader may also encounter snatches of heartfelt dry wit in some of his works.

Synopsis: This novel is about Baltic refugees and their lives in post-war England. The novel contains autobiographical elements, as the author includes details from his own life as a refugee. The plot focuses on events unfolding over the course of several months in the lives of the people living on Sola, an island just off the coast of England. Most of the novel is centred on a small segment of the island’s 170 inhabitants, and the main character is Arturs Skuja, a Latvian refugee. The most important events on the island and the experiences of its residents are revealed through the lonely, sensitive observations and emotions of this Latvian man still in the thrall of memories of his homeland. This Latvian refugee contrasts with another strong figure in the novel: the swaggering Juhans Raudseps, a former Estonian officer. With a heavy dose of incredulity, Janovskis examines contemporary events in politics and the injustices experienced by refugees living in exile. He also describes the horrific anguish felt by refugees at times, which they must somehow work to overcome. Running throughout the novel are the themes of longing for one’s homeland and feeling deep guilt about not being able to help one’s country.

Excerpt

While I was reading Knut Hamsun, it's how I had always imagined the trader Mack from Sirilund to be.

Mr Wainwright was a man of about fifty. Slightly greying at the temples, he had an aristocratic face and a faintly noticeable little pot belly. He practically owned the island of Sola with its one hundred and seventy inhabitants, fair-sized hotel, shop and two fishing vessels.

When I expressed a wish to work for him, he looked me up and down with a piercing stare and asked whether I knew how to row a boat and how to drive a tractor. I said yes. He then went over to the window and waved. The foreman had stayed behind in the yard to await the result of my audience. They did need a workman, I had already found that out in advance. Otherwise there would have been no point in paying for the motor boat that took me those four or five miles that separated Sola from the mainland. The foreman entered the office quietly, as if afraid, and Wainwright told him that I had been hired. As unskilled worker. The usual pay rate. That's it. He sat down at his desk and started shuffling papers around. Perhaps he wasn't really that busy at all and was only pretending, just to make an impression. I wanted to say something, I wanted to thank him but my English language was not yet fluent enough. I was still at the stage where I always needed to think about what I wanted to say. Then I noticed that the foreman was throwing me a meaningful glance and moving towards the door. I understood.

In the entrance lobby we walked past a stunningly pretty secretary who was tapping away on the typewriter with velvety quietness.

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

Outside in the yard, foreman Fred nudged me with his elbow and winked again:

"The boss is not one for chatting. Did you notice Norma?"

"The one at the typewriter?"

"Yes. Isn't she a looker, eh? Better not make eyes at her, though. She's not for you."

He laughed with a snigger, as if he knew more about the matter and simply did not want to say.

Before lunch, which we all ate together in the kitchen of the hotel (only the singletons of course), I was given leave to settle myself into the employees' wing. Here there was a whole row of numbered doors leading down a long corridor. Mine was right at the very end, with a window towards the north and overlooking the yard. The façade of the hotel faced the south and the sea.

But it was fine even like that.

At lunch I met the other employees. In addition to the housekeeper, whose husband happened to be Fred, there was a fairly large crowd working here. I could roughly tell what each of them did by their clothing and by the various smells that emanated from them. Several young girls, most likely waitresses at the hotel, laughed and giggled without a pause. The men seated opposite me, who could have been the gardener, carpenter and mechanic, ate in silence and glumly, steadily grinding away at the none too tasty food. The one sitting next to me smelt distinctly of fish.

In my own mind I had thought that my arrival on this island would attract a certain amount of attention, at least in the staff quarters, because surely it was not every day that a new employee was taken on. But in typical English manner, where any exhibition of surprise or – God forbid! – excitement was regarded as a sign of poor upbringing, nobody showed any interest in me. The housekeeper, too, who handed me the food, did so as if she was

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

bored and bared her teeth in a smile just as expressionlessly and blandly as she did to all the others.

Once we had drunk our inevitable tea, had smoked a cigarette and were getting up to go outside, my neighbour – the fish man - spoke up as if in passing:

"My name's Richard. What's yours?"

"Arturs," I said.

"Are you from Poland?"

"No. From the Baltic states."

"Ohhh," Richard drew out a long exclamation and tilted his head to one side.

Then Fred waved for me to follow him and we walked over the machinery shed which was situated quite a long way away from the hotel so as to avoid the guests being disturbed by engine noise. There was a wide range of agricultural machinery here: a sheaf-binder, hay baler, cultivator and several tractors. Luckily, they were old acquaintances of mine – Fordsons, which I'd worked with for about a year on a large farm in the county of Lincolnshire.

"Will you manage to cope with this?" asked Fred.

"Oh yes! Easy."

"Well than back it out and we'll hook the harrow onto it."

That didn't take long. Fred explained to me which road to take - though more with his hands and gestures, as it was difficult for him shout over the roar of the engine - and I was ready to go. But Fred made me stop the tractor.

"I can see that you're not a real farmer. You'll freeze like that."

He found a piece of rope in the shed and threw it to me.

"Tie this around your stomach. Look! Just like me. It'll keep you warm."

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

I did know that a rope tied around the waist helps considerably, but the new place and the new job had me in a kind of tizz, and it had completely slipped my mind that I could get cold while working.

"Wait, I almost forgot. You won't be the only Latvian here. We've got another one here working on the fishing boat. Tomorrow he's supposed to be coming back from being out at sea. Then you'll get to meet him."

"What's his name?"

"Who can pronounce your names?! Norma is the only one who knows because she works out everyone's pay packet. I call him John. Well, off you go!"

I started up the motor and drove out onto the road, but Fred, having followed me with his gaze for a while, walked back to the hotel.

The tractor rolled along the smooth road easily and I felt thoroughly exhilarated in my mind.

I'm a little superstitious by nature. I am afraid of the 12th and 13th of the month, and Friday has always been my unlucky day – ever since time immemorial. But today it was Wednesday and the 4th of April and everything had gone like clockwork. I had found a job exactly in the place where for ages I had been wanting to live for a while, I had a roof over my head and food laid on the table at meal times. And now I had a tractor's 45 horsepower in my hands and a smooth road under the tyres.

I could already see from some distance away the enormous oak tree beyond which – as Fred had said – started the field that I was to harrow, when a car horn blared out stridently behind me. I pulled over to the side of the road and it was Wainwright himself who drove past in a neat new Ford Consul, two fingers raised to the brim of his hat in greeting.

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

See, that's how you were supposed to greet people: with two fingers. He probably greeted foreman Fred with three. It was hard to imagine that there could have been any more important people living here. On an island as small as this there couldn't possibly be a doctor, nor a clergyman, nor a pharmacist or indeed a policeman. Perhaps the company accountant? Or the ships' captains or – as they called them here – skippers? Wainwright probably waved to them, and the wealthier hotel guests likewise, with his entire hand.

But how did he greet Norma? By gallantly taking his hat off? Or otherwise in the usual English fashion, hands in pockets and jangling keys? But at the end of the day it was none of my business.

Not far from the oak tree there was a gate at the side of the road, it was rotten through. Behind it was the field that I was to harrow. For a moment I stared after Wainwright. Who knows where this road led as it went further on? Between the trees with their loudly cawing crows I could see the roofs of several houses and a church tower without a spire: it resembled a fortress more than anything else. Perhaps the road led to the harbour, because further over to the right you could see a lighthouse. But I would get to know that later in any case.

When I drove onto the field, a flock of seagulls took off into the air and started wheeling around over my head, screeching raucously. I could perceive from the brisk spring wind that the sea was nearby.

The field was not very large, maybe five or six acres at the most; the soil was sandy and full of pebbles. The kind that was easy to work with. I let the harrow down onto the ground and watched with satisfaction as its hundred fingers grabbed and raked the clods of earth, and left behind it a smooth and level swathe of field.

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

Harrowing is a monotonous job that does not require any great attention. Once I had completed several laps of the field I was able to start looking around at my surroundings and to occupy myself with my own thoughts.

Spring had come early this year. Even though the wind blowing off the sea had an edge to it, the cheek that was turned towards the sun could palpably feel its warmth. The ground was fairly dry. In the leafless trees I could see various birds; they were hopping and flitting around among the branches and chasing each other, and, judging from the way their beaks were opening, they were also tweeting, chirruping or making a noise in some other way and expressing loudly their joy, except that I was unable to hear them over the noise of the tractor.

Strange, the beginning of spring in England. It did not arrive as swiftly as it did in our homeland. There were times here when it seemed as though all four seasons of the year had become mixed up, only that for a few days one would have the upper hand and then the other. A man of the land had an easy time of it here. It was possible to plough the whole year through, and there were nine long months for sowing: from September until May.

How very much differently spring would arrive in our home country. It would wade in one night through the ice and the snow and quietly knock on the windowpane with a frozen, rimy branch of the apple tree; it would rattle at the barn door, rustle about at the gable end of the roof and cheerfully insinuate its way down the chimney. And the next morning there would be a melting and a dripping all over the place, with the birch tree at one end of the *istaba*, the log cabin, souging a different melody, the stream would have been woken into life and the pine forest, having shaken off the snow, would be glowing vivid green in the rays of the spring sunshine. And as for myself, it felt as though some force that had been slumbering had reawakened in my veins and a brightness that had faded

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

sparkled in my eyes once again. That is how quickly spring would arrive in our home country. And the day would come when you heard the lark and spotted your first starling, and listened in wonder to its song. Here a bedraggled starling would hang about all winter long, disappearing somewhere for a brief moment right in the middle of summer, and its song was without ardour so it wasn't worth listening to it. Even the nightingale here sounded as though it was short of breath, and its voice had neither depth nor the mellow softness of velvet.

I wondered what it looked like in my homeland right now. In northern Latvia the fields were probably still covered in snow, although just as easily the thaw may have set in there as well. But in the Rucava district a ploughman was probably already trying his hand and the little bay horse was nimbly treading the furrow. And who's to know how this young ploughman felt inside. There was so woefully little to read in the newspapers about conditions in Latvia, and what was there, moreover, was only the bad. Did spring sing out loud in jubilation inside the heart of this man as well, the one who had been sent there to work for a while by the chairman of the kolkhoz, or the agriculturalist, or some other official in the new scheme of things – just as I had been directed by Fred?

The blue sky forms a canopy over his head. With a soft hiss the ploughshare cuts into the earth and it is left lying there with its moist side glistening in the sunshine. At the end of the furrow there is a moment of respite, both for the ploughman and for the horse. I wonder to myself what the ploughman in Latvia would be smoking? Good old 'Sport' or the stinky Russian *mahorka*? And then a patterned headscarf appears at the top of the hill, rounded shoulders, a young, lissom figure. It's Liene bringing breakfast. She garlands the young man's hat with hazelnut tree blossom and, laughing out loud, throws it far into the

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

field. And then the young man grabs her in his powerful arms, and having furtively looked all around him, kisses her in the lee of a bush, and then kisses her again and again...

But perhaps life over there ticks over drab and bleak, each step taken is leaden and weary, each day that is lived rolls on like a greyish drop of water in the autumn rain. We read so little about our country and, what's more, it's all bad...

Glancing at my watch, I jumped in fright: it showed that there were just a few minutes left until five o'clock, the end of the working day, but I still had the very centre of the field left to do. I decided to finish it off. It would be tantamount to sin to drive all the way back home and then return tomorrow just for the sake of that tiny little patch that remained.

It was nearing six o'clock when, having completed harrowing the field, I could see from the road Fred standing by the machinery shed. But when I got closer and parked the tractor, there was no longer any sign of him. Mildly surprised by this, I went to my room.

Our evening meal was at six o'clock. I had finished eating and was about to rise from the table when Fred waved me over.

"Did you finish it off?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow you'll be with Richard. At the port, on the *Jolanta*. He'll show you around. You'll meet John there, too."

"Good."

"Later on in the evening, until the summer guests start arriving, we usually watch television in the small lounge. Come along and join us. There's a great cowboy film on tonight: *Cisco Kid*."

"Thanks."

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

He gestured that I could go.

But when I was at the door he called me back again.

"I meant to let you know something: we don't pay for overtime here." And shot me a pointed look.

I went to my room and lay down. The spring wind had burnt my face, it was now stinging as if in flames. I was feeling light-headed as well. That was from the fresh air.

So I hadn't done the right thing, finishing off the field. Fred made that quite clear to me. The English way of thinking and their approach to work was a lot different to ours.

Well, in future he would not have any reason to complain about me.

And tomorrow the *Jolanta* would be mooring up at the island, and on board there is a Latvian man by the name of John. More than likely Jānis. Men named Džons were few and far between in Latvia.

Was there any place in the world where there weren't any Latvians living nowadays? Men who had tilled the soil, for whom even the thundering Liepāja tram may have once seemed a pure marvel of technology, not even mentioning Riga, had suddenly started to settle the whole wide world. New York, London, Sydney, Toronto – these place names had become so ordinary for us, mentioned every day. Gradually the myth had been dispelled, the one that once upon a time had led us to imagine these places glittering and shimmering under dazzling streams of light with pillared opera houses, theatres, vast cathedral-like museums and a breathtakingly wide-ranging and active intellectual life. Today we were familiar with the grey streets of the suburbs that began immediately behind the glittering opera houses and museums, the working-class neighbourhoods, the slums. And the life that was led here in apparent overabundance, but was monotonous, empty and aimless. So

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

dreadfully aimless that we simply stood there, astonished, and could not believe our own eyes.

Who's to know whether we were the losers or the winners by becoming citizens of the world? Well - losers definitely. Only it had not happened out of our own free will, and there was nothing we could do to change that.

A door slammed in the room next to me. There were the sounds of a chair being moved, a drawer being opened, and a soft, girlish voice. My neighbour was evidently one of the young waitresses from the hotel. She was humming a plaintive melody. I listened and could not remember where I had heard it before.

Oh yes, of course: it was an Irish folk song.

* * *

The next morning after breakfast Richard and I dug out a couple of bicycles from the machinery shed. Fred was in a foul mood and was cursing and swearing non-stop at the mechanic, saying that he never had anything up to scratch. We left them stooping over the sowing machine and rode out onto the road.

The sky was overcast, but so saturated with blinding white light that I expected the sun to break through at any moment. It was really quite chilly and, while holding the steel handlebars of the bicycle, my fingers started to freeze. I alternated hands, putting one at a time in my pocket to warm it up. We were going inhumanly slowly, but Richard could not be persuaded to speed up.

We left the field that I had harrowed on our right. Then we rode through the village with the church that I had caught a glimpse of the previous day. In addition to the pub, the Red Lion, I saw seven or eight cottages with moss-covered thatch roofs, ones such as I

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

remembered seeing at the Open-Air Ethnographic Museum in Riga. I liked these roofs. The houses beneath them looked so cosy and warm.

The road began to climb uphill. When finally, with great effort, we reached the top, there, in the curve of the road, the sea suddenly appeared before us.

I got off my bicycle. Casting me an odd glance, Richard dismounted as well and started fiddling about with his pipe.

The road had led us up to the very top of the central ridge of the island; this was some hundred metres high, perhaps even more. Far down below, the cliffs formed a small bay with numerous boats. Some – as tiny as toys – lay pulled up on the shore. On the bluff which reached out far into the sea stood a white lighthouse, like a matchstick stuck into the ground. But all across the horizon, as far as the eye could see, lay a grey sea. In several places where the sea met the sky it looked as though the sun had broken through the blanket of cloud, and there the level line glinted as if it were shiny silver. A number of ships, barely discernible in the fine haze, sketched dark streaks of smoke into the sky. A light breeze blew into our faces, fresh and invigorating.

We stood there like that for a good long while.

Places in Latvia came to mind, places where I had once stood on high ground, or in a tower, gazing at the expanse of the low-lying country stretching out all around me.

There was Apeskalns Hill with its church tower, from which a magnificent view gave on to the surrounding forests in a variety of hues ranging from dark green to purplish blue, weaving their way towards the south and melting into the flat wetlands of Lake Lubāns. And towards the north, where stood the giant Estonian peak Suur Mūnamagi, rearing its mighty head into the heavens.

Gunārs Janovskis "Sōla"

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

There was the lighthouse Miķelbāka in the Zilie kalni - the 'blue hills', Slītere Forest at its feet, with Cape Kolka in the faraway distance and the spire of the Mazirbe church like a needle against the sea lying on the horizon.

In the years of my youth there were times when I had stood there, observing my surroundings, and I had felt a kind of strange and powerful sense of delight.

A faint reflection of this delight flooded into my heart now as well.

"What do you think?" All of a sudden Richard spoke up. "Who's going to win? Arsenal or Wolves?"

To tell the truth I couldn't care less which team was going to win, because in the process of my Anglicisation I had not yet reached the level of being an expert on football. But in order not to appear to be a complete ignoramus I said that it would probably be Arsenal.

"I think so too," Richard replied, pensively. "That Wolves' player Billy is injured and without him they don't have a real plan of attack. What's more, Arsenal are playing at home. That's really important. Although it could just as well end up a draw, even so."

"Yes, it's hard to say."

"That's the trouble. They never play according to what you wrote in your pools coupon. Last season I didn't win a single time."

"Me neither."

Richard nodded sympathetically and knocked out the contents of his pipe against the handlebars.

"Let's go," he said.

The road wove its snakelike way down the steep slope and we constantly had to press hard on our brakes.

Gunārs Janovskis “Sōla”

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

The bay was considerably larger than it had looked from the top. There was a collection of warehouses, boatsheds, lean-tos and a fuel storage tank. There was smoke coming from the chimney of the workshop, and in the yard, accompanied by the deafening clang of metal, two men were working a red-hot piece of steel. A motley assortment of fishing equipment lay around everywhere, either thrown into heaps or else hung up on stands, a pungent smell of fish hanging over it all.

But the air itself seemed to be seething with the beating of a thousand pairs of gulls' wings and their raucous shrieks.

In the middle of the bay – or, let's say, the harbour – a fine-looking yacht and a largish motor launch were tugging on their mooring lines. At the end of a floating pontoon the *Jolanta* was gently bobbing up and down in the waves.