

Biography: Nora Ikstena (1969) is a prose writer and essayist. Ikstena is one of the most visible, and influential prose writers in Latvia, known for elaborate style and detailed approach to language. After obtaining a degree in Philology from the University of Latvia in 1992, she went on to study English literature at Columbia University. In her prose, Nora Ikstena often reflects on life, love, death and faith. Ikstena is also a prolific author of biographical fiction, non-fiction, scripts, essays, and collections of short prose. Ikstena is an active participant in Latvia's cultural and political life, and a co-founder of the International Writers and Translators' House in Ventspils. In 2006, she received the Baltic Assembly Prize in literature.

Synopsis: In *Celebrating Life*, a peculiar woman named Eleonora has invited seven colorful characters to her own funeral. Eleonora is peacefully laid to rest, but in the evening following the funeral, these seven people, seven ghosts from the past, share their memories of Eleonora, with the stories serving as the book's "celebration of life." In sharing their memories, the storytellers wander about in space and time, embarking upon expeditions to distant metaphysical places. Reading the novel is, first and foremost, an aesthetic experience. Its tone is serious, nostalgic, strangely unreal, and beautifully wise.

Excerpt

Hunger and Rapture

"The voices of badly wounded animals are soft. Nothing to be afraid of." Sofija's voice was somewhat muffled. "Back in the Russian forest, we used to call each other "animals" ..."

In the late fall, in that distant, strange place where the devil says "goodnight" in a Slavic tongue, the animal Sofija and the animal Eleonora kneaded earth together with straw and dung to caulk the chinks in their shack for even the slightest shelter against the fierce cold, which would arrive only too soon. They worked without sparing themselves, for they knew

too well how slowly and painfully frostbitten skin heals, how hard it is to breathe air hot with fear, how sick you get after eating a frozen potato thawed in hot water.

"We are scarabs," Sofija said, rolling a big ball of earth and dung in her chapped hands, "but not a single Egyptian peasant takes notice."

Eleonora continued to work in silence. For an entire year, she'd been sharing life in this hell with Sofija, who spoke a private language which only resembled Latvian. When Sofija was in a good mood, she would explain to Eleonora what she had intended to say. When Sofija unlocked her language, Eleonora discovered such incredible and beautiful things, that for a moment she forgot her hunger, cold, hopelessness, hard work, and thoughts about death, which were as familiar to her as the late sunrise and the early sundown. When Sofija locked up her language, Eleonora hid her wounded feelings and her fear, because suddenly in that wooden shack they were separated by distances no train could cross. Trains. Steam engines, which might take them out of this hell some day, the hell they brought them into ...

"Does this look like the globe of the earth?" Sofija asked Eleonora, holding up a carefully rolled ball of earth and dung.

Eleonora smiled and silently nodded in agreement.

"Scarabs rolled dung balls, and they reminded Egyptians of the globe. And they thought the beetles' strange heads looked like the rising or setting sun. Those were the days when people could still select their symbols." Sofija resolutely squashed her careful creation and stuffed it, almost angrily, into a crack. "Weeee," she said, working vigorously, "we want to survive, just like their mummies."

Eleonora and Sofija fought starvation together, they saw some sort of significance in their battle, since they no longer had numbers and they could address each other freely as

"animal Sofija" or "animal Eleonora." And the shack had no electric fence around it, that

fence which had frightened so many numbers as well as been their only comfort.

A twosome made the nights more secure. Because usually they were afflicted by one and the same nightmare. Once their eyes closed, they saw guards pushing a man into the enclosure where female numbers who had lost their minds were kept in isolation. He suffered a horrifying death. He was kicked and ripped apart by crippled minds and crippled love. After seeing this, Eleonora nearly lost her own mind. Sofija watched over her with care and shielded her from the guards in case they'd notice another candidate for the enclosure. Sofija soothed Eleonora by describing a painting which depicted the transformation of animals into humans. Carnivores, herbivores and birds amicably jumped off the top of a cliff and swam out from the river as human beings. Men and women. When Eleonora shut her eyes to imagine this scene, she calmed down. She was filled with joy at the thought that someone had seen this world as harmonious and beautiful.

Even now, in the shack, where every loving day reminded Sofija and Eleonora of the freedom to starve to death, they often discussed this painting, though strangely enough Sofija could not remember its date, nor the name of the artist.

The short, warm stretch of fall was the paradise of this godforsaken corner. A truce was struck between the native inhabitants and the imported traitors to the homeland. They all vanished into the forests and rivers and picked, picked, picked berries and mushrooms. Then they used various methods of their forefathers to preserve their pickings in preparation for the return of the long cold and of hunger. Pick not, and you die!

For Sofija and Eleonora, the first warm fall was intoxicating. They swam in the rivers, rolled around in the moss, ate cloudberry three times a day, put out bonfires with huge orange-headed mushrooms ... They fashioned crowns from whitlow grass, the so-called "hunger flowers", not thinking for a second about how much they were tempting fate. A

local man, old and friendly, showed them leaves of certain plants which frequently transported both of these Mayflies into an entirely different world. To start them off, the old man lent them his old pipe and a few strips of rolling paper.

So then, as twilight fell, they would lie sprawled on a river's steep bank, wearing their whitlow grass crowns on their heads, smokily clouding their minds with a beauty that was utterly strange and full of desire.

Watching the warm northern river, Sofija saw the path of the setting sun, boats and sunburned men in bright shirts with round hats on their heads. They calmly rowed in a common rhythm. The men fished for souls with nets like butterflies. Sofija smiled.

Eleonora saw a gigantic bridge which instantly joined both shores of the river like a rainbow. And the bridge was crammed full of people. But more and more people kept arriving on the bridge, trying to squeeze past each other. Every now and then someone was pushed aside, fell in the water and drowned. The ferryman pulled out the drowned bodies from the water and lay them to rest in his boat. Eleonora cried.

That first reckless fall was followed by a cruel winter of hunger. People were ready to scratch each others eyes out for a mere frozen potato. Several children died, and the mothers came to Eleonora to ask her to sew their shrouds, promising two potatoes or one salted dried fish in exchange. For the first time in her life, Sofija prayed to God, asking Him to stop this ghastly fast. For Him to create cloudberry fields, springing from nothing in the dusk of the harsh winter. For Him to unfreeze the rivers. To stop punishing them so harshly for the excessive happiness of the fall. Because God knows best how recklessly repressed senses break loose. Like rivers, mountains, heavens. The mind can't create anything as mighty and beautiful.

Eleonora confessed to Sofija that along with the constant gnawing hunger she'd gained a

terrifying sense of freedom - that nothing was forbidden, as long as you got food for it.

"I now have Siamese feelings towards matters which used to be as clear as day to me," said the animal Eleonora in the hot shack, stirring hot water in a bowl. "All the commandments turn out to have twins. Thou shalt steal and hate your neighbour, if he hath taken away your last potato. Thou shalt fornicate with five Russians in a row, if thou getteth canned army meat in return, thou shalt fornicate with Russians even for a few cigarettes, because then thou shalt not feel hungry for a while ..."

"Here no one would take your soul, even for free - for Russians, giving your body for bread - that's nothing," the animal Sofija replied to Eleonora.

"The body is worthless," Eleonora agreed. "There was once a tough, beautiful Latvian woman who hid a Jew in his own huge apartment. She used to tempt fate and make love to a German officer next to the tiny room she'd set up as the hideout. One night, after pausing for a short nap, the officer woke up and mistook the door of the hideout for that of the toilet ... In a flash his alcoholic and sexual stupor vanished, and instead, the loyal son, faithful to his country and convictions, resurged in the officer. He went into the bedroom and shot the beautiful, sleeping body. Then he turned away in disgust, and spent a long time in the bathroom, scrubbing off the incriminating marks and stains, while awaiting reinforcements. The body is worthless, but I'm so very hungry." Eleonora looked at Sofija pleadingly, as if she might know where they could grasp some final straw.

For lunch they cut up two boiled potatoes into tiny pieces and scattered tears of dried oregano on them. The scent of the tears reminded them of an herb they'd smelled ever so long ago. Then, instead of grace, Sofija said:

"According to an ancient belief, birds such as plovers live on wind alone. If only we could turn into plovers and fill our bellies with the wind ..."

Then they took one piece of potato at a time and chewed it slowly, even though what they wanted more than anything was to thrust their faces greedily into their bowls like starving dogs, chomping with quick, large mouthfuls.

As was their custom, this ritual deception of hunger was enhanced by Sofija relating the story of how Pantagrue travelled to the Sneaking island, where Shrovetide, the man who fasts, was the ruler. Sofija would try to remember the various amazing and rare characteristics and powers of Shrovetide.

When he cried, roasted ducks in onion sauce appeared.

When he blew his nose - salted eels.

When he trembled - large rabbit pates.

When he hiccuped - dried bulls' tongues.

When he sweat - cod in fresh butter.

When he whistled - baskets full of green beans.

The miraculous skills of Shrovetide made an incredible impression on the imagination of the two women tortured by hunger. Eleonora shut her eyes, her head spun a little, and with razor sharp clarity, she sensed herself sitting at a long table in a large dining room with a smooth clay floor. There were twelve men sitting around the table, if she had counted correctly despite the incredible lightness in her head. And the table was set with exotic foods, including some Sofija had remembered from the story of Shrovetide. Aromas and desire wafted through the air. Someone offered Eleonora almond butter, someone else - canapes, someone else - white muscat wine.

"Why such waste?" thought Eleonora, lingering in her pleasant vision. Hands, some bony, some big and fat, kept offering her exotic tidbits. In the middle of the heavenly meal someone pushed a silver bowl brimming with beautiful red wine towards Eleonora. A little

later, she saw a delicate hand holding bread by the fingertips to lightly dip it into the wine.

Eleonora stared at the hand as if nailed to her seat and was afraid to look up.

"Not me, Lord?" she whispered, the last mouthful nearly stuck in her throat. "Not me, Lord?" looking up, she cried out in fear.

"Eleonora, Eleonora!" screamed Sofija in the middle of her story. She frightened the celebrants of life, the way you frighten people when you mention someone by name who should remain nameless. Sofija's lips were dry, as if she was actually reliving the distant days of hunger. The name she'd invoked snapped Sofija out of a deep reverie.

"She was so pale, so tormented and fearful, I thought she would drop any minute like a cut blade of grass and I would be left alone with the merciless hunger and winter," Sofija said defensively. The looks she faced were full of disbelief. Looks full of doubt.

For a moment silence reigned in the funeral home.

Helena patted Sofija's fragrant hand, got up and stood by the open window. She inhaled the dark, fresh air, grateful for the moment of silence. She wondered whether the spring flowers on Eleonora's grave would be even more fragrant now, at night. Maybe there'd still be a burning wick of a melted candle, all jumbled up with the earth? Eleonora had gone to where she came from, but she lived only in the here and now. Helena thought it was terribly unfair that Eleonora was not allowed to attend the celebration of her own life. It never occurred to Helena to question or doubt any of the stories that filled this humble room, one after another. Suddenly Helena ran out of metaphors which might let her understand how unfathomable was the world contained in every person.

Todhausen, too, was grateful for the prevailing moment of silence. He considered that here, where they were inundated with stories, such silence was in honour of the deceased.

Todhausen gazed at Helena's shadow, breathing on the wall, as motionless as Helena. The

shadow rendered Helena's features sharp and somewhat ominous. Like Helena, the shadow was an unopened seashell. If you broke it open out of curiosity, you'd only cripple it. No one knew whether it ever opened up to the rays of light that invaded the watery depths.

Todhausen felt that a long, long time had passed since he'd set eyes on Helena for the first time. And yet he knew very well how recent it had been. And even now he could see the bright line all around Helen just like around a seashell, a line that spoke of an opening and how much light was hidden inside this modest shell. Thus she quietly shimmered and breathed in the dark night air and Todhausen did not dare to bother her yet.

"It's hard to believe in hunger," - Sofija interrupted the sceptical silence again. "But I'm not telling you that we walked on water, though people have believed that kind of stuff as well ..."

Hearing Sofija speak, Todhausen suddenly recalled a very early and rare memory in which he saw his father. Two happy adults and one small child are playing in the sand by the sea. Not a living soul in sight, neither near nor far, only the roots of the trees gnawing through the dunes, and a strip of land jutting far into the sea. A strip of land in the sea ... A strip of land in the sea ... Father began to walk along it, balancing like a high wire act in the circus, sometimes flapping his arms just like the wings of a bird. Father kept on going and going. Uga remembered squinting so hard that the wide, wide sea became only a narrow streak of horizon. But father just kept going, and now Uga was sure that he had been walking on top of the water for a good long time. He remembered asking mother whether it was true that father could walk on water. Mother smiled, ruffled his hair, and said nary a word.

"At night, in order to ward off our oppressive hunger, we used to divine the future,"

Sofija steadfastly continued her tale.

"In Ancient Rome, they told fortunes by reading Virgil." Sofija's statement made "Virgil"

sound the same as "coffee grounds", "lines in the hand", "wax and oil", "cards," "hot coal and poppy seeds," or "fig leaves."

"They'd choose a page of Virgil's writings at random, read a line and base their predictions on it. Later the Bible was perused in the same way. We had no Virgil, but we did have a Bible." "For by me thy days shall be multiplied, and the years of thy life shall be increased," Sofija read, opening to the proverbs of Solomon, as luck would have it.

Eleonora, barely recovered from her vision of wild feasting, smiled wearily.

"We will live long and happy lives, we will have loving husbands to snuggle up to in the early morning, we will have children born of an easy labour, and we will always have some black bread and salt," she foretold sceptically.

Sofija pushed the Bible towards Eleonora. Eleonora slowly turned the fragile pages.

"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy."

"No one will confess to their sins and therefore they will continue in their evil ways, and evil will always prosper, no matter how much we hope for the best. Whosoever has truly sinned, will not accept mercy, even if it's given away for nothing. And I hope that God will not forgive them, because they know what they do."

"Therefore the heavens held back their waters from you and the lap of the earth locked up its fruits."

"When suffering reaches its highest level and the cup runs over, the heavens above will open and shower us with warm rain. It will rain for many days, the rivers will overflow their banks, and we will escape long before the last boat leaves. Once the floods end, the lap of the earth will be more fruitful than ever, we will be able to sow whatever we like, and reap what we have sown."

"A man, born of woman, lives only for a brief moment and is full of restlessness. He grows like a flower and wilts, he glides like a shadow and disappears."

"No one can predict eternal life, just that some will glide like shadows, while others will prevail."

"A prudent man foreseeeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished."

"Soon the world will smother in its prudence. The more prudent it gets, the more rarely some simple person will pass on through the evil. And the prudent will not lend a hand to the suffering simpletons so they can learn from their mistakes."

"Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?"

"You don't tell fortunes with the truth."

"Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone uphill, it will return upon him."

"One day the world will turn into a gigantic forest, and on every step there will be deep pits in the ground, carefully covered with branches, moss and leaves. Everyone will want to capture something. Many will fall into their own pits; however, there will be many more who will fall into pits dug by others. People will capture each other and will have forgotten something as senseless as rolling a stone up a hill. A man digging a pit isn't thinking about hills."

"Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?"

"Those who'll try to hoard fire will burn up like pyres of dry wood in city squares, those who walk with torches will rule and protect themselves."

"Let not thine heart decline to the ways of the wanton, go not astray in her paths," Sofija read this line in a particularly edifying tone so that both of them, despite their weakness and

exhaustion, burst into laughter. Eleonora grabbed the Bible, leafed through it again and quickly scanned the open pages.

"And I will destroy the magic in your hands, and there will be no more soothsayers in your midst."

At that, they exploded with the suppressed laughter of exhaustion.

After this nightly fortune-telling ritual Sofija pulled out a roll of paper and a cloth pouch from a special hiding place in the wall of the shack. She tore off two longish strips of paper and, taking a handful of a dry, brownish green mixture from the pouch, carefully dropped a pinch into each strip. After the first three puffs Sofija and Eleonora loved this world tremendously. They had gotten the knack of mixing bad tobacco with the dried leaves pointed out by the old man.

The mourners were surprised by the undisguised pleasure, embellished by expressive gestures and mime, with which Sofija described the wonderful nature of her smoke-filled consciousness in those distant days of hunger.

"I was a bird flying slowly through the fog, I was a bird floating on the waves, I was the fog gently cradling the bird, I was the waves rocking the bird, I was the water turning into the fog, I was the light released by the lifting fog..." tiny old Sofija spoke in elated poetry. She was lulling the mourners into the phantasmagoria of her long-ago evaporated smoke.

"Then, on one of our hungry nights, there was a knock at the door," Sofija said, sobering up suddenly.

"A poor little Russian stood in the doorway, wearing a dirty, thick green winter jacket. He'd come to examine our hunger. His face wasn't ugly, but gloomy and drawn and kind of frozen. Without a by-your-leave, he plodded to the table, sat down in his coat, pulled out a worn-out booklet and, writing awkwardly, entered our names into a long list. He glanced at

our starvation meal, took a good long look at us, and then said in Russian:

"You need bread or you'll die."

Well, we certainly knew that bread would be a good idea.

"You're as shrivelled as dried out pea pods."

We reminded the poor young Russian of dried out pea pods.

"Pale and bloodless, bloodless broads are like scarecrows."

All we could understand was that we scarecrows weren't hot-blooded.

I guess he got mad at our hunger, because the Russian got up and slammed the door so hard that the whole house shook.

The next morning the poor Russian dragged an unplucked chicken with a freshly wrung neck into our shack, growling that he would be back for supper.

All the restrained passions of the long period of hunger awoke in us. One might have thought we were expecting the Messiah Himself to be coming that night. Long-forgotten smells throbbed in the air of the shack, bubbling, crackling, toasting, melting, boiling, sizzling. We set a royal table, decorated with dried mint and candles we'd carefully saved up. In the evening the door opened, and the poor Russian stood there, glued to the spot. Eleonora kindly took him by the hand and helped him take off his coat. The peasant blushed like a young girl and stared with dreamy eyes at emaciated Eleonora, who had loosened her smooth hair and in the feeble candlelight looked more like an apparition than a human being.

The meal took place in festive silence, the poor Russian gulping as quietly as he could. Once fed, the dreaminess in his eyes was replaced by a greedy brilliance. He watched Eleonora's each and every simplest movement with pleasure - how she picked up the big wooden bowl with both hands, how she scooped out the last bits of the stew, how she

arranged the mint in the shape of a crown at the empty end of the table ...

"You have good soul," I said in the little Russian I knew.

"My soul has forgotten me," the poor Russian said, and the brilliance in his eyes was replaced by sadness.

Eleonora, washing the dishes, slid like a shadow from the table to the stove and back.

"Without soul, life is scarecrow," I said, repeating the words I'd heard him say the day before.

Eleonora sat down on the low log by the stove, practically at the poor Russian's feet, and listened to us talk.

"Yes, life is a scarecrow in an empty field where no birds fly. Protecting what it shouldn't protect," he said and smiled at Eleonora.

Eleonora smiled back like a debtor to her saviour - a meek and respectful smile.

"The body is worthless," she said, as she took the poor little Russian by the hand and took him behind her curtain.

After that the poor Russian always came and disappeared in the dark - we gradually forgot our hunger, we didn't have to recall the miraculous powers of Shrovetide or to foretell the future. We only had to say our prayers for nothing to happen to Eleonora. And lo, she was protected, for we only took the road to the old crone once, when, after taking the crone's potion of green soap, Eleonora writhed for an entire night and bled for a long time. And the poor Russian sat weeping behind the shack.

Back then, just when she'd recovered from her ordeal, as she slurped hot broth she told me that in the short snatches of sleep she'd get during her nightmare of pain, one and the same dream had come to her several times -- an invisible face, a face she could only sense, would hover very, very close to her and say: "You worry and complain about a lot of things,

but only one thing is needed. If you choose this one thing for yourself, it shall not be taken from you."

"May my guilt vanish just like that moon is disappearing from the sky," gazing at the moon, which had truly begun to wane slightly, Sofija ended her story.

Words had a tremendous power. They took you prisoner and they granted unknown freedom. They were instruments of torture to make you suffer, and they were the long awaited refreshing drink. You could burn at the stake for them, and could win eternal goodwill with them. You could curse and you could plead with them. You could tell shameful lies and you could tell the plain truth. Words settled on the mourners like a thick fog, climbing out of the sea to conceal the tree-tops and church towers, the mountains and chimneys, the skies and weathervanes for a while. Maybe soon they'll be sitting in Eleonora's tiny room and they won't see, but will just feel each other? Will hear each other breathing and maybe accidentally touch each other? But they won't be overwhelmed by fear or despair, as those who lose their way tend to be overwhelmed. Near each other, but at an imperceptible distance.

"Angels' wings," Bita-Bita said in a muted and halting voice.