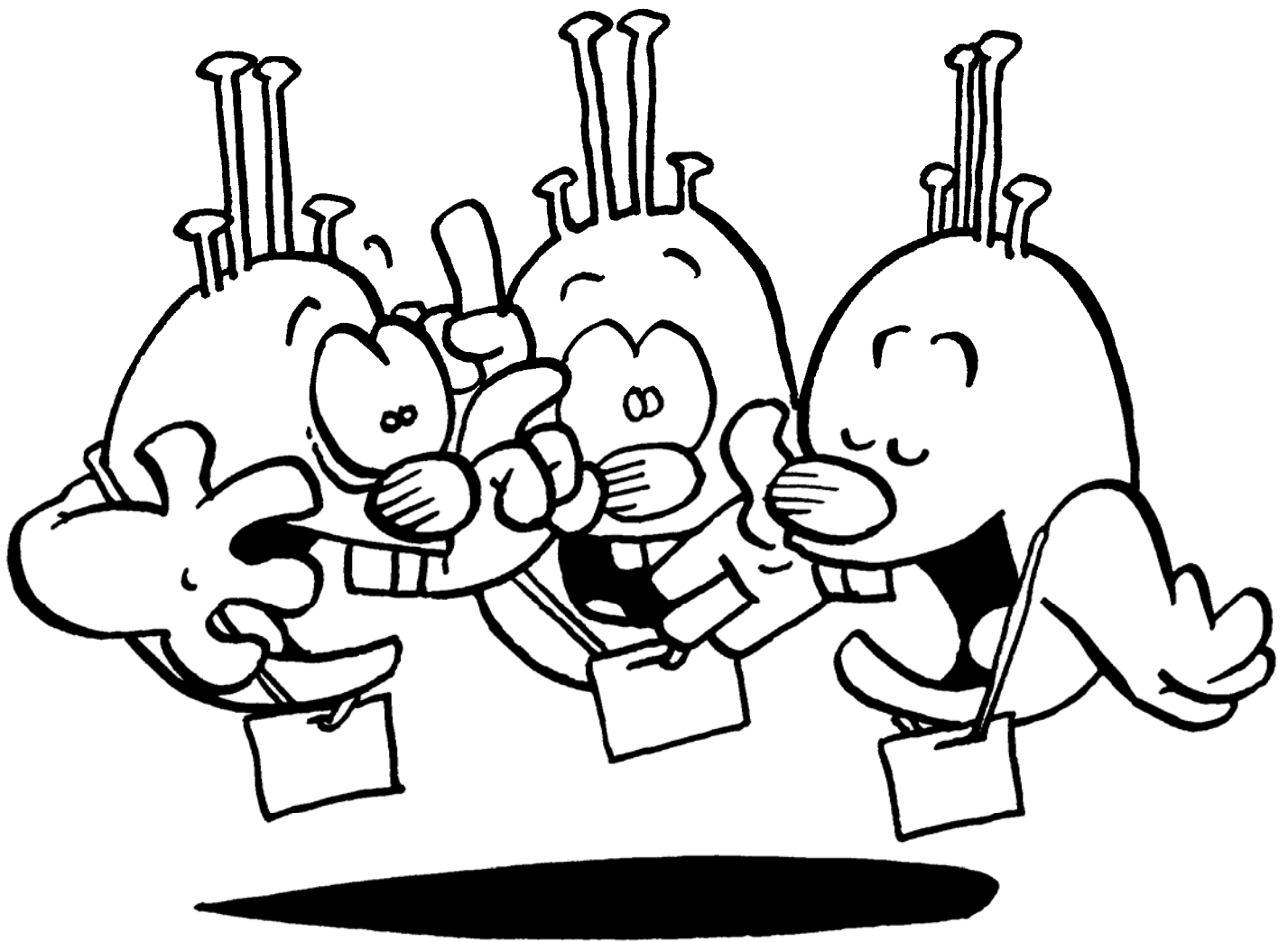


PANPERSHAK

No. 101



WORLDCON 2008

EDITORIAL

Dear reader,

"Parsek" is the oldest Croatian fanzine, first published in 1977 as the bulletin of Science Fiction Club SFera from Zagreb. Today, SFera consists of some two hundred members and is a literary society, as well as being a fan club. The annual SFeraKon conventions attract hundreds of fans, while prestigious SFERA Award is being given in several categories. You will also notice that many authors represented here are SFERA Award winners.

Now, let me introduce you to the Croatian SF, with the little help of SFERA's official mascot, Bemmet.

Enjoy!

Boris Švel

In Zagreb, 31st July 2008

"Parsek" on net:

<http://parsek.sfera.hr/>

and:

<http://parsek.blog.hr/>



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NOTE: all materials are translated by the authors themselves, unless stated otherwise
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Being one of the foremost Croatian SF authors, Aleksandar Žiljak was born in 1963 and resides in Zagreb. He won SFERA Award six times, equally excelling in illustration and prose, as well as the editorial work, being the co-editor of the new Croatian SF literary magazine UBIQ.

Aleksandar Žiljak

FLUFFY

“Well, not bad for the first day”, Ivana mutters with satisfaction, glancing at a clock on the wall. True, the clock shows there’s still two hours till closing time, but Ivana doesn’t expect anyone to bring a pet for trimming at six p.m., so she hopes for some idling. Perhaps she could phone a coffee bar across the street and ask Martin to fetch her a cup of coffee. He doesn’t look bad, Ivana muses. Not bad at all. Quite a hunk, as a matter of fact. And she didn’t miss the way she caught *his* attention, too. She’ll let things develop for a day or two, say till weekend, and then... Maybe they could take a ride out of town and who knows what can happen next...

Ringling interrupts Ivana’s daydreaming rudely. It’s the entrance membrane, announcing a customer. Ivana rolls her eyes. Damn, just as she was hoping for some rest!

“Mrs. Hulme is not here?” Mrs. Hulme owns the pet care salon. She hired Ivana three days ago, telling her to start today. The woman standing before Ivana is dressed in money from head to toe. Ivana

measures her up - not too obviously, she hopes - and adds. Shoes plus black trousers plus red jacket plus shawl plus purse... Well, several grand at least. And that’s on sale. Only, this woman doesn’t look like someone shopping on sales. And there’s also a bracelet and rings and ear-rings, probably a necklace, too, hidden under the shawl. And a hairdo and make-up - discreet but top quality - that you don’t get for small change. And all that on a supremely shaped and polished body, despite her late forties. As Ivana’s brother, an auto mechanic, would say: nothing beats a well-refurbished old-timer.

“No, Mrs. Hulme is absent today... Some family business, you know.”

“Oooh... And I really have to go for a trip tomorrow, and my Fluffy can’t travel the way he is... You’re new here?”

“Yes, I’m Ivana. This is my first day. Mrs. Hulme is not here, I’m sorry.”

“Hmmm, and what am I to do now? And Fluffy is really...” The woman obviously doesn’t have much faith in a beginner, and the hurt professional pride

starts stirring in Ivana. Was I best in class or wasn't I, she thinks angrily. And why is this woman kidding me, as if I can't trim some poodle?

"Well, no problem, madam. I can take care of your Fluffy!"

"Really?" Ivana nods eagerly. "You're right, I think you'll manage! Fluffy is not difficult, you know..."

Where the hell is that Fluffy, Ivana wonders. The woman entered without any dog or kitten or whatever people keep as pets. But, the entrance membrane remained opened... "Come, Fluffy! That's the boy, you just come in... You'll tidy him up, won't you? You just trim his hair a little, while I take a walk. I'll return in an hour, hour and a half, OK?"

Fluffy enters the salon somewhat reluctantly, and Ivana immediately curses her professional pride and best marks in school and her big mouth. Fluffy stops, sniffs around and then comes to his lady and licks her hand. Ivana stares in disbelief and then snaps out of it. "Err... Madam... Fluffy... What *species* did you say he is?"

* * *

A Korab ground sloth is a three-meters-long animal, measured from the blunt snout to the tip of its short tail. It is meter and a half tall at its shoulders. Fluffy's front paws are armed with strong claws, some fifteen centimeters long, and he's

waving them menacingly right now, keeping Ivana at safe distance. His hair falls almost to the floor: warmer days are nearing, and Ivana has no doubt he could use some trimming. But, when Fluffy's owner left and Ivana took scissors in her hand, sighing... Fortunately, Fluffy warned her with threatening grumbling: Ivana would have never deduced from his tiny, dumb eyes that a creature like that can have deadly intents. Apparently, he doesn't recognize her scent. But, what was that damned woman thinking, Ivana wonders, why didn't she warn her?

Well, serves me right! I have no one to blame for this but myself, Ivana curses as Fluffy sits on his haunches, overgrown in a meter-and-a-half long hair, snarling every so often as the deadly-looking claws whiz through the air.

"All right. Relax, take a deep breath... There must be a way to handle this hairball. Maybe I should call Mrs. Hulme?" Ivana reaches for a cell phone in the pocket of her smock, but then she stops. It may not be such a good idea after all, not on her first day here. Mrs. Hulme could get an impression that Ivana cannot handle matters. No use that she trimmed four pocket poodles under a magnifying glass (each barely twenty centimeters long), used tweezers to exterminate ticks on a Maltese dwarf elephant (wasn't that a veterinarian's job?), cleaned ears of an Aldebaran haremorph (half a meter long!) and polished a Wistary armourclad's carapace (the most grateful

customer: she just pulls in and there's nothing to worry about). No use, if Mrs. Hulme decides that Ivana cannot handle a simple Korab ground sloth!

So, Ivana decides not to phone for help. Maybe there's something in drawers, some instructions or notes? Only, the desk is on the other end of the salon, and there's Fluffy between Ivana and the desk.

And so, Ivana slowly heads for the desk, her back against the wall, not taking her eyes away from those claws. Tiny, mistrusting black eyes follow her, but if Fluffy didn't charge so far, Ivana hopes he won't.

The desk has several drawers. Ivana saw some pads and notebooks in one of them. She knows that one notebook is for bookings. She opens the drawer and takes everything out of it. Still keeping her eyes on Fluffy, she leafs through the notes. Yes, here it is, she found it! Mrs. Sova and Fluffy, booked for 18:15 today. So, Fluffy's owner is Mrs. Sova. Pleased to meet you! And Mrs. Sova even brought Fluffy a little early. But there are no instructions, none whatsoever. Apparently, Mrs. Sova presumed that Ivana knows what to do with Fluffy. But, she doesn't... Sighing, Ivana digs deeper in the drawer, finding some displaced pencils and an old lighter. And then she finds a little horn... Hmm...

Bad idea! The moment she honked, once, twice, Fluffy reared and howled and sat back, still holding his claws before him.

Only, his stare stopped being stupid and definitely became angry. "All right, all right! You're right, it pierced my ears, too!", Ivana admits, returning the horn back into the drawer.

Maybe she should try the Net? Ivana looks at the clock on the wall. Damn, she already lost ten minutes, and by the time she finds how to trim a Korab ground sloth... She knows what she's facing: she graduated on hygiene and grooming of Aldebaran snow cat. 357 000 sites on Aldebaran snow cats, mostly about sex among Aldebaran snow cats and sex *with* Aldebaran snow cats. And only three sites with coherent instructions on how to groom Aldebaran snow cats. Same thing with all exotic pets. And she didn't even hear about that damned sloth in the school...

"Bloody cow!", Ivana curses aloud. "Loaded herself with dough, so no way she'll buy pets normal people buy! A poodle, a great Dane, a Persian cat, a panda bear? No, milady has to have a ground sloth! What does she see in you, anyway, all you do is sit and grow!" Fluffy doesn't reply, but he doesn't lower his claws, either. Damn, she can't even reach him... Maybe she should try some nice words?

"You're a good one, Fluffy, good one... Now, you must be soo hot and auntie Ivana will trim you just a little bit... Just let me take care of you, and you'll be so niice and cool..." Ivana tries to approach Fluffy, comb in one hand, scissors in another. She

barely makes a step before those claws whizz through the air. Ivana bolts away, but also realizes that Fluffy could have already shred her to ribbons if he really wanted to. This way, he just warns her and keeps her at bay. Only, this stalemate can last forever: it won't do if Mrs. Sova returns to find her Fluffy as overgrown as he was when she left him here.

"Perhaps Martin knows something", Ivana hopes as she takes her cell phone. The way he brought coffee to Ivana today, he was bringing coffee to Mrs. Hulme and all the others working here, so maybe he knows...

"Yes?", Martin's voice on the other end of the line sounds impatient. Ivana hears murmur of guests and music: the coffee bar must be crowded.

"It's me, Ivana."

"Listen, I'm a little pressed here, I'll..."

"HEEEEEELP!"

"Let me guess: Fluffy? I've seen the Sova woman bringing it to you."

"Devil may take him, all he does is rears and growls and waves those claws of his and he won't let me close and..."

"Hey, listen, no panic! You've got a little box in one of the drawers. Pale blue, with fancy butterflies and flowers and a key. Take it and wind it... It's for little babies."

"A little box? I didn't find any little boxes", Ivana opens drawer after drawer,

rummaging through them. "I did find a horn..."

"Nooo! No horns, he hates that! Find the box, it must be there somewhere..."

"But, there's no... Oh! Here it is!" The box is a piece of kitsch Ivana wouldn't even look at, pushed deep in the third drawer. Obviously, Fluffy doesn't come too often. "And this will calm him down?"

"No. Look, it's not for him..." Not for him? "I don't have time to explain right now, you just play the box and see for yourself. I'll call you back, OK?" And Martin hangs down, leaving Ivana more baffled than before. Not for him? Then for whom?

OK, let's see, Ivana sighs and winds the music box. A quiet, ringing melody spreads from it, some ancient lullaby. Fluffy is still reared, his claws drawn, but Ivana notices the hair on his belly moving, as if there's something hidden in it.

"What is *that*?" A tiny pointed snout emerges, sniffing the air. And then, a small animal, no longer than Ivana's index finger, disappears back under the hair. Some more commotion, it takes perhaps a minute for a grown male zebra shrew to come out of Fluffy's coat. Ivana recognizes it, it's a common animal in gardens, named after striped back. Another one appears after the first one, somewhat smaller. It's a female, and she's not alone! A tiny shrew holds her tail with its teeth. Its tail is held in turn by the second one, who is held in turn by the

third one. Ivana counts six little ones. Daddy zebra shrew, mummy zebra shrew and a caravan of six baby zebra shrews. “I’m not supposed to trim them, too, am I?!” And then the caravan stops, mummy looks around and squeals silently. A moment later, the seventh tiny shrew leaves the sloth’s hair and grabs the sixth one with its teeth. Now, with everybody present and accounted for, the procession descends to the floor next to Fluffy and moves aside.

Fluffy looks at them for several long moments. Ivana has a momentary impression that he’s counting them, and then, when he’s certain that everybody got off him, he lowers his claws. “I mean, really!”, Ivana mutters as she approaches Fluffy carefully, holding scissors in her hand, suspicious and ready for all kinds of dirty tricks. But, the huge animal, that threatened to tear Ivana apart only a moment ago, is now waiting meekly for her to start trimming his hair.

* * *

“You see, the lullaby is a sign for the shrew family to leave the coat while the trimming goes on. The Sova woman has the same box at home. She winds it when she baths and brushes Fluffy. That’s what the shrews learned to recognize.”

“You know, I could have sworn he was counting them!” Ivana sips her coffee. Working hours are over and she dropped to

Martin’s. She had to thank him somehow for his advice, and the Saturday evening is already agreed upon.

When Ivana was done trimming and brushing him, Fluffy looked pleased. And the shrews looked pleased, too: they rapidly climbed his leg and crawled back into his coat. Most important, Mrs. Sova was also pleased. “Oh, my, you really tidied him up! And you didn’t have any problems with him, did you? He’s a good boy, my little Fluffy! And I’m sure to tell Mrs. Hulme how good a job you did!” The tip turned out to be quite nice, not bad for the first day, not bad at all.

“Well, he wanted to see if anybody was missing.”

“But, I mean, isn’t he too stupid to count? And where did he pick them up, anyway?”

“Probably in his garden.”

“You know what?”, Ivana murmurs. “Come to think of it... He was really overgrown, but his coat was completely clean. No ticks, no fleas, mites, seed, nothing.”

“Ha”, Martin winks, “Why do you think he guards them so jealously? Zebra shrews are renowned pest exterminators.”

“Well”, Ivana thinks about it for a moment, then shrugs and takes another sip. “I guess there must be more than meets the eye behind those eyes.”

It is sometimes quoted that the female authors are the actual mainstay of the Croatian science fiction, and Veronika Santo certainly comes to mind for that matter. Born in 1957, she currently resides in Rome, Italy and is a SFERA Award winner. Venturing into most diverse motifs, ranging from cyberpunk to the magic realism, her stories are always a pleasure to read.

Veronika Santo

THE HEART OF THE BEAST

Alisandra dreamt.

* * *

She paused briefly beside the stony well. As she leaned toward the smooth dark water, she saw his face.

He watched her behind the water mirror, black eyes sprouting like geysers. He was hairy, infinitely ugly and she felt tears of pity filling her eyes. She didn't turn. Instead, she reached for the reflection.

"I won't hurt you", Alisandra said. "If you let me touch you..."

The image wavered and a moment later, the black water plate was empty again.

A knot of dark paths spread before her, leading into a labyrinth in the middle of the garden. A white rose bud lay on the ground before her. The stem was squashed as if somebody chewed it through with teeth, but the flower smelt fresh and sweet.

* * *

Next night, Kaliopo watched again as his wife attached the dream-tape around her head. Its crystals glittered softly in the grey light of

the room.

"What are you dreaming tonight?", Kaliopo asked. "Why don't you take the tape off for one night and dream your true dreams?"

"These are my true dreams", Alisandra muttered, her head sinking into the pillow.

Kaliopo studied her spilled curls for another moment, white face smiling at the first touch of sleep, and then he pulled his blanket to his chin and turned to the other side of the bed.

* * *

Alisandra already walked the dreamy path that opened to the garden and castle. The garden changed considerably since last night. Weeds disappeared from graveled paths, hedges lost their untidy crowns and stretched all the way to the central labyrinth. Even the castle looked somewhat brighter: the shutters of her room were opened, so sunlight mixed freely with the cool of inside darkness.

She stepped freely on the path, feeling the fresh sharp smell of trimmed box in her nostrils. She knew the tale. The beast was somewhere in the castle or the garden, waiting for her. It hid in the dark corners, ashamed of

the evil encrusted in its grotesque mask. Once it feels love, the magic will save it and she will experience the final scene with the prince.

Today, the paths opened willingly before her, just like spread fingers. She chose one and it took her straight to the shady interior of the castle.

Like always, the warm live coal in the fireplace broke the darkness of the large central hall. Alisandra quickly stole upon the stairs and run up. She felt her heart flutter uneasily in her chest.

Her room was upstairs. It had a high ceiling and walls covered in dark wood traversed by a tall mirror, like a stone inserted in a ring. Alisandra smiled at her reflection and reached for a dress, its spread white lace waiting on the bed.

A dead bird stared glassily at her from beneath the dress. Feathers on her wings were torn, tiny droplets of blood spread on the white sheets around the twisted neck. Alisandra slowly opened her mouth, and then she screamed forcefully.

* * *

“I don’t want you sleeping with that tape anymore”, Kaliopo said resolutely.

“It’s a classic tale”, Alisandra replied. Her voice was calm, but she still felt her pulse beating madly.

“This is just the story framework”, Kaliopo answered. “I know you’re using semi-autonomous programs.”

“That means nothing can happen to me that I don’t want.”

“And what do you want?”

“For the beast to turn into a prince. That’s the tale, isn’t it?”

“That means I’m not enough as your prince”, Kaliopo tried a joke.

Alisandra didn’t answer him. She turned to the other side of the bed and closed her eyes. Still, she didn’t put the tape that night.

* * *

In two days, Alisandra was back in the garden. She passed all the paths, only avoiding the labyrinth. The garden was resplendent. The rose shrubs were flowering, fountains were awake, water drops opened on the gravel like tiny rainbows.

He wasn’t in the garden, he wasn’t in the house. And yet, he was there somewhere, Alisandra felt his stare. The wind dragged his breath along the path, weaving it before and behind her as if she was closed inside a noose. Alisandra stopped suddenly and looked into the closed walls of the labyrinth.

“If you let me kiss you...”, she said. “If you let me kiss you...”, she shouted at the dark entrance of box, not finishing her thought.

Small green leaves rustled, as if the wind rose suddenly from the ground. A white rose fell quietly before her feet. Somebody tried to open the bud and the petals now lay opened and despised. Alisandra recalled the previous bud and the dead bird and started crying.

* * *

Kaliopo watched her walking across the house restlessly.

“You’re ruining yourself”, he said. “That damned night-program will kill you!”

“He wants it, he must want it”, Alisandra said more to herself, as if she didn’t hear him. “That’s how it is in all tales. A frog and a princess, for instance. Why do you think I’m ruining myself?”, she rose her head suddenly. “It’s just a tale.”

“It possesses you too much for being just a tale”, he answered her, turning his back to her. Suddenly, he felt very tired.

“Besides”, she laughed and he shivered at that laughter, ringing like autumn rain against pavement, “I think you’re just being jealous.”

* * *

Alisandra stood at the entrance of the labyrinth and listened to her heart beating. She knew he was there, waiting for her. She took a deep breath and started ahead. She walked calmly and steadily, as if knowing the way. The center unwrapped towards her like a coil of thread.

He waited for her there, his back turned to her, his arms and legs too long, his head too large. Revulsion filled her for a moment, but then she recalled the tale and stepped straight ahead.

She stood behind him, barely reaching his shoulders, completely calm. The moment came, she knew what she had to do.

The beast turned and Alisandra yielded at the same moment. They looked at each other. His eyes moved like boiling sea, sucking her in like whirlpool of hot tar. She realized instantly that there was nothing beneath, nothing hidden, no prince.

This dark stare was all the reality, timeless evil getting ready to punish her for

daring to reach for the heart of the beast.

Alisandra turned and run, straight down the path disappearing in the outer part of the labyrinth. Moon shimmered palely on the box shrubs. White gravel flew beneath her feet, twigs caught her dress. She felt strange silence behind her. Perhaps the beast didn’t even need legs. It will catch her with thoughts like tentacles and pull her into its abyss. Alisandra thought of Kaliopo. She stopped for a moment, closed her eyes tightly and thought of Kaliopo sleeping on the pillow next to her.

* * *

Kaliopo turned in bed and looked at his wife uneasily. Her face was pale, her hair black. She’s beautiful like Snow White, he thought gently, and then he leaned and kissed her fleetingly in her mouth.

* * *

Alisandra felt the kiss and opened her eyes swiftly. She saw Kaliopo’s face in the semidarkness.

“Your heart beats so strongly”, he said and kissed her once again. “Why don’t you stop these nightmares?”

She reached for him and embraced him tightly. They lay like that for a long time, side by side, as the night drained slowly towards the first lights of the day.

(Translated by Aleksandar Žiljak)

One of the younger authors, Zvonko Bednjanec is a name to reckon with...

Zvonko Bednjanec

THE NINTH DUCK

On the very edge of the Universe, in the most distant arm of the Galaxy, on the last planet of the System, there's a Hill. Freshly overgrown in grass, a really large hill by some standards, it has a dilapidated wooden hut on its top. The hut is without windows, smoke rises from its chimney. A huge slug, weighing several tons, white in color with blue polka-dots, climbs that hill, advancing its voluptuous mass towards the hut. The volume of the hut is such that it's not even theoretically capable of accommodating the slug.

Will anybody of them figure it out today?, the slug thought. *Will anybody stand out?*

You must know that climbing of a slug scaling several tons takes time. Although in the barren grassy landscape, a lot of things happened before him. Numerous flying things circled above the hut and disgorged their gaudy and multi-tentacled passengers. One of them just materialized at the entrance, surrounded by the bright white light. Before entering the hut, they were all searched by a quick look of a three-legged and four-armed monster with horns and so much equipment all over him that you wouldn't feel like telling him a joke in the broadest of daylights.

Finally, the slug reached the hut. He greeted the horned one with a nod and entered. Interesting thing was, as he passed the doors, stooped and with difficulty, his bulk changed from slimy and stocky mass into a bill and head and feathers. The truly real Great Duck entered the hut! But these weren't real bill and head and feathers, they were more energy-like, untouchable. The Great Duck waddled to the semi-circular table. The other nine ducks, also transformed, already sat at their places.

The outer doors closed. The horned one remained outside and hung the inscription ARCHITECTURE WORKSHOP - DO NOT DISTURB, positioning himself menacingly before the doors. Not that there's anything that could overwhelm him, not that anything exists that could hurt the creatures that just entered.

"The reason we met here today", the Great Duck started without greetings and introductions, "is an ever-increasing number of mistakes and faults in our products." All the nine sitting ducks observed her waddling, left-right. "The deadlines are prolonging, the expenses are mounting. Gods are unsatisfied - they devote eons to a Universe, without results." The silence echoed. "You know what

are the unsatisfied gods like, don't you?"
Thundering silence. "Does anybody know where does the mistake lie?"

The gazes of nine ducks flew across the table. The tension grew visibly, because this was an architecture workshop after all, and they should have an answer. Then, the toothed duck with glasses spoke. Of course, we all know that ducks don't have teeth, but this one really looked as if her front teeth project a little bit...

"I think... err... I think the Universes are becoming increasingly monopolar", the toothed duck said.

"Explain", the Great Duck commanded.

"Every universe is based on transformation of energy and matter", the toothed duck said and adjusted her glasses with her wing. "In the last several instances, I worked on markedly matter-matter ones. The energy level is low and so the fight to control the matter happens all the time. Wars, money, slavery, all that... I think."

"Give us an example", the Great Duck commanded again. Met by the horrified stare of the toothed duck, she put forward a suggestion: "For instance, Mirko the two-legged goes for summer holidays."

"Mirko goes for summer holidays on the beach", the toothed duck started with scared look. "He just digs the sand and sea and stores them in his pockets. He doesn't even look at She-Mirko: she doesn't interest him. He does not think about the Being of the Universe."

"That cannot be", the morose duck spoke. "In matter-matter, you at least know what you're working with. Everything else is zero. That's the only way things get any good..."

"If I really set myself to work", the mustached duck interrupted the morose one, "I'd work on matter-energy universe. It's much easier to reach the balance. When you work that way, it doesn't matter if the construction of the universe is petard-contracting..."

"Ooooh, you know what", a duck with really fine energy feathers rose. "This sounds real super, but then you get Mirko the two-legged, you know... The beach is real cool to him, but he doesn't take his eyes off his She-Mirko, much less his fingers, pardon me for saying, so at the end the Being of the Universe again comes to nothing. And wars and all that? They're still here. 'Cause you can buy She-Mirko with money."

"The only correct universe organization setting relates to energy-matter." It was a deep-sounding voice of the plate-billed duck. "Beings elevated above the need to satisfy the material achieve considerably larger degree of comprehension..."

"Me disagree...", the pointed-ears duck opposed her.

"That cannot be", the morose duck spoke, but the pointed-ears duck was louder and so she continued:

"Energy-matter not dealing so much with material. Control, also. Control what others think. Control others to control what

others think. Mirko and She-Mirko on the beach all the time, eat sand and sea a little, because they stable bio-fields, mixed, together. Sun enough for them. They no think how is being a duck.”

The ready duck saw a moment of silence and jumped the meeting. “My choice would always be the energy-energy setting, yes, yes. Little raw materials, a lot of energy, without much bothering, yes. And then I choose the Great Contraction option and everybody learns how it’s done.”

“Don’t give us the crap that it works! It never works”, the morose duck said.

“What doesn’t work?”, the ready duck shouted.

“Yeah, well, it’s sooo...”, the fine-feathered duck spoke again. “But even here Mirko-boy is not much-of-a-something, just floating through beach and water. He doesn’t look at Mirko-baby but chooses the best spot for the energies of sea and sand and sun. And what? What’s there for him to worry about? No tale of Being and blah-blah. It’s all so clear.”

The silence was again audible in the room. They all somehow seemed to look at the Great Duck. They expected something. Miraculously, she spoke:

“And? What’s the solution?”

The answer didn’t come. They all sat, crestfallen.

“All right, then”, the Great Duck said. “You said everything. Every universe is transformation: from several-atoms-amoeba to pure energy being. And vice versa. Every

universe also has its structure: the big bang and/or contraction, the DNA helix, two poles with interfering shadows and so on. All according to the investing deity order. All right?”

Silence.

C’mon, the Great Duck thought. *Anybody. Anything.*

“We need something new, don’t we?”, the Great Duck asked. “A new premise? Not just the stated ones?” *C’mon, ducks! It’s right before your bills!*

Nothing.

“What does universe do, besides the said transformation?”, the Great Duck asked. “It grows old, doesn’t it? If it grows old, what’s the third premise?”

Suddenly the ninth duck spoke, the one that kept silent all the time: “We don’t know. Would you help us?”

The Great Duck studied all that worthlessness that looked at her, begging.

“The growth spin. The beings helping other beings to develop. The beings that help the processes of universe transformations.”

Nothing.

“And of course, the decay spin. The beings that steal the growth from others. That steal energy from the correct sequence. That destroy civilizations, kill species and subjugate them. Thus maintaining the balance of positive and negative.”

Nothing.

The Great Duck stared at a point on the floor. She must do it now. Indeed, it can’t be helped.

The Great Duck drew a matter-energy knife and went after her pupils. Some ducks tried running, some tried outwitting the horned one at the doors. With the same outcome.

* * *

The huge slug with blue polka-dots was in front of the wooden hut, accompanied by the monster carrying so much equipment:

“Did you do them, Boss?”

The slug nodded his colossal head.

“Shall I gather them and send them back?”

The slug looked sadly somewhere downwards: “Not this time, Strongy. This time, I did them for real.”

The horned one became dejected. He didn't understand. “But, Boss, these guys were close?”

“There's no 'close' with us, ducks. You either are or you aren't.” The slug started his descent down the hill.

“It's all about the ninth duck, isn't it, Boss?”, he heard behind him.

* * *

It is a good question what conclusion will the scientists of every universe reach when they discover that ducks are the only organism and species capable of surviving in every biotope on almost every world. Many species then try - by changing their genetic structure - to approach this ideal to the maximum. But a duck is not just bill and head

and feathers. A duck is an idea! You cannot think like a duck - you must be a duck!

This is not the first time that he had to clean the entire workshop. Really clean. It is terrible to think of a path that every of these beings had to pass, things that an individual has to do in order to overgrow the universe it lives in? To survive its death? The path that elevates the being to the level of a god? But, recently, these young gods... So lost...

You cannot really kill a god. Not even a young one. These ones will be returned, sown into some young universe. Let them start the cycle once again. You can imagine things he will have to hear from their parents.

It happens more and more often. Universes without offspring. Naturally, everybody blames his office. The question he keeps asking himself is, what kind of parents they are, unable to create children, gods without heirs? Or is the fundamental idea really worn out? This Being embodied in the holiest of symbols? Is the Time of the Duck reaching its end?

All the time, he kept running into a cow across universes. Sacred cow this, sacred cow that. Is that some rudiment from the past? A subtle game played by an even greater player? A sign of things to come?

If he was forced to choose... A more significant shape? A porcupine, perhaps? A camel? No. That's not it... It cannot be.

(Translated by Aleksandar Žiljak)

Well established author and editor, Milena Benini is also a renown translator. Being a SFERA Award winner, she never hesitates to lend help to the younger colleagues. Milena lives and works in Zagreb. Her stories are usually irresistibly charming, and we hope you will enjoy this one.

Milena Benini

THE CIRCUS HAS COME

Some things never die. Like flies. The one on the ceiling above Chico's bed was so tiny, Chico had been staring at the little dot for a couple of minutes without knowing it was alive. And then, as flies sometimes do, it started walking in senseless, confused lines, and the man on the bed realised what he had believed to be a spot of dirt was really a living creature. He followed it with his gaze for a while, trying to discern a pattern in the fly's itinerary. When both the fly and Chico's gaze ended up at the same place for about the sixth time, the man gave up. The fly made a few circles around the little room, and then settled dignifiedly in a far corner to resume its confused walk. Chico smiled at the fly across the room.

"You're just like us, really," he murmured, but the fly didn't reply. "I'll bet no one expected your species to survive deep into the space-age. But you did. And so did we."

The fly answered this with another quick round of the room, then returned to the place on the ceiling where Chico had first spotted it.

"Besides," added Chico, leaning back so he could keep the fly in sight, "your travels seem as well-planned as ours."

The fly said nothing, again. Chico let out a resigned sigh. The fly wasn't particularly good company. But then, after being crammed in the small ship for almost a month, neither was anybody else. Chico closed his eyes. It was better than staying on surface, he supposed, but being the biggest small interstellar circus had its drawbacks, too.

Like the rain, for example. Chico missed the rain. He frowned, trying to recall when was it that he had last felt it. He missed the tiny dum-dum sound of raindrops and, also, he missed the meaning of it: rest. There was no dead season for a space-going circus and, since Benjy had, three years ago,

faced them all with the choice of closing up or going to the stars, the only periods of rest they had were the four weeks the ship needed to travel in deep space, two in reaching the relativity-banned hole and two to cool off after coming out of it.

They were actually earning money, which was better than they could hope to do on surface, that much was true. The colonised planets were either too developed and rich to give a chance to a six-men show, or too busy with staying alive to have time for fun. But the stations were different. Sprinkled all over the known universe, they served as mid-points between planets and the space, where people would serve in short shifts between real duties. In practice, they were used for storing away the too old or too shaky. There was nothing really to do in a station. But people were still posted on stations. Like flies or circuses, old habits didn't die away.

And then there were the border stations. Not connected to any single planet, they were the outposts of the empire, circling in endless waltzes on the very edges of the space man had conquered. They were supposed to serve as welcoming-committees in case some alien race decided to make its appearance. Pushed further on every year, they were small, boring, and useless. Mankind had spread far from its original planet. But it was still alone. Chances that a foreign race would be found were considered non-existent by now. But you

could still find late shows where dashing heroes confronted dangerous black spiders from galaxies far away. And the border stations, nick-named boredom stations, remained. And circuses, even small ones like Benjy's, were a welcome sight.

Which was why they were heading to a border station right now. But Chico was getting bored with border stations and just about everything else. Travelling through space sounds grand, but it's really very much like going around the world in a jet: it's fast, and you don't get to see anything. Only, it takes a lot longer.

Even the fly seemed to lose interest in Chico and buzzed through the half-closed door out into the corridor. Outside, somebody said, "Hey!"

"Yes?"

"We're nearing the docking area, Benjy wants you in the control room."

"Oh."

Of all the people aboard *The Lucky Bastard*, Chico was the only one with a pilot's licence. Most of the time, it didn't matter - the automatic controls took care of everything - but, near the stations, Benjy always insisted on Chico being present, just in case. With a sigh, Chico got up and went out.

"Couldn't you have just buzzed me?" he asked.

"The intercom's broken again," replied the tall man who had been waiting for him. "The twins are trying to fix it but,

considering what happened when they tried to fix the artigrav system, I thought this would be quicker."

"Well, you're the magician, you make it work."

Everything was always coming apart on *The Lucky Bastard*, and Chico was starting to suspect the ship's name related to the fact that it still managed to fly.

The magician smiled and shook his head. "Not even Houdini could make that work," he said. "And I doubt very much that the twins can. But they're trying."

Something in the magician's voice made Chico look at him suspiciously.

"Using what technique?"

"Curse it and slam it, then switch it on again and see what happened."

"I don't know why I'm the clown," murmured Chico climbing the steps that led to the control room. "You should take my job, Pieter."

Pieter, better known as Pierrot the Magnificent, shook his head.

"Oh, no. You couldn't do the magic act."

"Anyone can take cats out of top-hats."

"Not with my style. Besides, Belle wouldn't let *you* stab her with stilettos."

"Or with anything else, for that matter," added a female voice from the control room. "Have the twins done anything to the intercom?"

"I don't know," answered Pieter. "Haven't you checked it from here?"

"We've been far too busy trying to make the bloody computer work." Benjy turned to Chico with an expression of despair on his face. "We can't make contact."

Chico looked at the radar and the fat light-bug that represented the station. "But that's impossible. We're so close now we should be able to phone them, let alone connect with their computer. Let me see." Brushing Benjy aside, he seated himself at the controls and pressed several buttons. When the computer ignored him, he turned on the communicator.

"This is *The Lucky Bastard*," he said. "Registration number LBD/4-CA3 We're having trouble with our computer. Request permission to come down."

He waited for a while, but nothing came out of the speaker. He tried again, with the same result.

"This is insane," he said finally. "Impossible." He turned to Pieter. "Go down and see what the twins are doing. If they've messed with the communication system, I'll personally throw them both off their trapeze without a net." Speaking, he started turning the power cells off.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving power. If we can't contact the computer, we can't get into the station. If we can't get in, we'll have to go someplace else."

"But we can't," said Benjy. "We've just enough batteries to get us down. We were counting to get a refill here."

Chico sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Couldn't we have taken some reserve?"

Benjy fidgeted with his tie. "Well, power's so damn expensive on Vars, I thought..."

"The twins swear they haven't touched anything but the intercom system. Which still isn't working", interrupted Pieter coming back.

"Great," said Chico. "What now?"

Pieter sighed. "The way things are going, we can expect the power cells to go down on us any moment now. Do we have any candles?"

Suddenly, Chico slammed his fist against the control panel. "Candles! That's right!"

Pieter lifted his eyebrows. "I suppose there's a pun coming, but I admit I don't see it," he said.

"Not a pun," answered Chico enthusiastically, "but a solution!" He switched the engine back on.

"What are you doing?" asked Benjy worriedly. "You're getting us closer to the station."

"Of course I am." Chico was concentrating on manoeuvring the ship. "I have to, if we want to contact the station."

"Why? We're too close as it is."

"Of course!" exclaimed Belle. "The candle!"

"I don't suppose either of you geniuses would care to share your brilliant idea with the rest of us mortals?"

"Don't you see, Pieter?" Belle got into the seat next to Chico's and started turning the front lights off. "We'll contact them visually. With our candle."

That was the nickname the twins had given to the ship's beam-cannon. It was so weak the best it could produce was a blinding light. But, since *The Lucky Bastard* kept well away from dangerous areas, the weapon was never replaced.

Pieter frowned slightly. "Suppose nobody happens to look out of the window?"

"Don't be so pessimistic, Piet," snapped Belle. "Somebody's bound to, sooner or later. After all, what else have they got to do, in a border station?"

"You've got a point there," admitted Pieter and settled into his chair. "Let's just hope there's somebody bored - and familiar with Morse - down there right now."

There was, apparently. As soon as the station came up on the front window, Chico stopped the ship and started shooting in Morse. He sent several SOS's, then their name and registration number, then the SOS again.

"What could they use to reply with?" asked Benjy. "I don't suppose they've got a lousy beamgun, too."

"No, but they should find something. Turn the communicator on, too," said Chico. "It might decide to start working again."

A couple of minutes passed with the station apparently unconcerned. Then, suddenly, all the tiny lights on station windows went out at once.

"Either they've forgotten to pay some bills or they're answering us," Pieter murmured. Chico waved him to silence with an impatient hand, watching the dark spot that the station had become. The lights went on again... then off. Urgently, Chico started writing the dots and the dashes down.

"Wel-come the Lu-cky Bas-tard. Per-mis-sion to dock gran-ted," Belle was deciphering. "Ha-ving com-pu-ter trou-ble, so-rry. Will beam do-cking in-struc-tions. Great!" she exclaimed finally. "So we're stuck with a station that's as lousily equipped as ourselves."

"All they have to have is a generator where we can fill our batteries," replied Chico. "And then we can go someplace civilised and have our systems repaired."

"Well," tried Benjy gently, "the least we can do is give a show for them, too."

Chico nodded without turning, carefully noting down the relative coordinates he would need to dock the ship by hand.

"Of course we'll give a show. We're a circus, aren't we?"

"I wonder if they'll be surprised when they find that out," said Belle.

They were, but not half as much as the circus crew. With *The Lucky Bastard* safely stored in one of the station hangars, they were greeted by an old, wrinkled man.

"Hi there," said the man. "My name's Jeremiah Torette. Welcome to my station."

"Your station?" Benjy forgot his manners in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there's nobody else here but me and Connie."

"Connie?"

As the man nodded, a wild scream rang through the hangar and a ten-year old boy ran to meet them with all the eagerness of his age.

"Here you are! Great!"

Seeing the old man's look, the boy stopped shouting and straightened his shoulders, extending a serious little hand towards Benjy.

"Constantin Torette-Yasharin, at your service."

"That's Connie," explained Jeremiah. "My daughter's son. His parents died, so he lives with me. And you are...?"

As one, all six member's of Benjy's shouted: "We're Benjy's - the biggest small interstellar circus in the Universe!"

Both the man and the boy seemed a bit startled by this unexpected publicity stunt.

"What's a circus?" asked Connie. John, the younger of the twins, exchanged a look with his brother and ran towards the

wall. His speed allowed him to make a few steps fly-like vertically, opposing the station's artigrav, then he made a back flip in the air and landed securely on his brother's shoulders.

"That's a circus," he said, jumping back to the ground.

"And, if I may add," interrupted Pieter, reaching behind the boy's ear and taking out a big bunch of artificial flowers, "this also." He presented the flowers to the boy, covered them with a handkerchief, took the bunch back and blew, showing the empty hand that was all that was left under the blood-red silk.

"And there are animals, too," said Belle, "only I'm afraid I can't show them to you before I've fed them."

"Wow," said the boy. "That's *amazing*."

"Well," Benjy turned to the old man, "we're sorry to impose on you in this way, but our batteries are empty and we seem to have some slight trouble with our computer..."

"Yes," Chico added, "you said yours isn't working properly either."

"That's right," said Jeremiah. "All communication systems have gone on strike."

"Really? That's strange - the same thing happened to our ship. How long has this been going on?"

"Oh, this is one of the oldest stations, you know. Things break down every now

and then." Jeremiah shrugged almost apologetically. "Never mind that. There's nothing to communicate, anyway. But here, let me offer you some refreshments - I'm sure our supplies are still more varied than ship food."

"We'll be more than glad to accept your offer," said Benjy. "And tomorrow morning, we will put a show for you."

The crew exchanged curious looks. Benjy was a nice man, but volunteering to do a show for two...

"Well, what?" Benjy shrugged. "We're a circus, aren't we?"

And so, the next morning found all the crew at work, setting up their one and only ring. Belle was showing Connie her lion and two lionesses, and the twins were warming up for their trapeze act. Chico, his face already made up, fidgeted for a while, then finally got up and went to Pieter's cabin.

"Listen," he said. "There's something strange going on."

"What do you mean?" Pieter was checking out all the equipment in his magician's tails.

"I don't know, exactly."

"Well, if you're talking about all communication systems going down, I think you're right. But since our collective knowledge of such things could be engraved on one of Cleo's claws, I don't really see what we can do about it. Do you?"

Chico shrugged. "I don't know. Why isn't the man more upset? He lives here, for God's sake! If I lived on the edge of the known universe, I'd get crazy with worry if my communication system went down."

"Well, if I lived in this station I'd go crazy period, but I can see what you mean. Maybe he's gaga."

"Did he seem so?"

"Not really." Pieter finished his dressing and checked himself in the full-length mirror. "But then, you never know."

"Some help you are."

Pieter smiled as he put Cleo into her hiding place. "On the other hand," he said, "we've been in space for three years now. Maybe it's time we took a good long rest on firm ground somewhere."

"You think I'm growing paranoid?"

Pieter just looked at him with his eyebrows raised. Finally, Chico gave up with a sigh.

"Alright, maybe I am," he said. "But this isn't what we usually meet at the stations."

"This is one of the oldest borders, you know. Practically all the spreading has gone in other directions. That could account for some things."

"Like an old man being the only one left in charge, okay. But not for the communication systems. Both on *the Bastard* and on the station."

"Coincidences do happen."

"Do I have to like them?" asked Chico. Before Pieter had time to answer, Benjy knocked on the door.

"We're going in five," he shouted. "And that goes for both of you Siamese!"

Chico frowned. "Do I always end up here before the show?"

Pieter shook his head seriously. "Of course you don't. Sometimes I go across to your room. Let's go."

The ring was set in all the glory it possessed, just like for any other show. If it weren't for the single bench that faced the arena, no one could have guessed the amount of audience the Benjy's were preparing for. Jeremiah was already in his seat, but Connie was nowhere in sight. In his MC suit, Benjy peered through the curtain.

"Where's the rest of the audience?" he asked.

Jeremiah looked around with a confused expression on his face. "He was with your animal trainer. I thought he would come down with you."

Muttering curses under his breath, Benjy went behind the curtain, shouting for Belle. But before he found her, Connie came running from the opposite direction.

"Can we wait just a little longer?" he shouted. "They haven't come yet!"

Jeremiah let out a sound of both surprise and anger, but the boy ran past him and caught Benjy's sleeve.

"Please? Just a few minutes. Please!"

Benjy automatically looked at his crew for reaction.

Chico frowned and leaned towards the boy. "Who hasn't come?"

"My friends. I told them about you, and they so want to see you, only they haven't arrived yet... But they're real close, it'll only be a moment or so..."

"What friends, Connie? How could you tell them about us? Who are they?"

Jeremiah's hurried steps approached them, and Connie suddenly froze, as if afraid.

"What's going on?" asked the station keeper. "What has Connie been telling you? The boy's constantly inventing stories, you know," he added, taking his grandson's hand. "He's lonely. Don't pay any attention to it."

"No, grandpa," said Connie. "It's too late. I've told them."

"I know you have, Connie. Now you'll just apologise to the gentlemen for wasting their time and... you mean *them*?"

Connie nodded. "They're coming."

"What, now? You can't be serious!"

"They wanted to see the show."

"Gods!"

Jeremiah let Connie go and let out a deep, desperate sigh. Chico looked at him and said: "Suppose you tell us what's going on?"

"Yes," answered the old man. "I don't see that I have a choice."

Half an hour later, the entire crew of Benjy's was gathered behind the curtain, ready to start the opening parade.

"Nervous?" asked Pieter in a low voice.

Chico laughed. "Of course I'm nervous. How many times in your life have you performed for alien life-forms who prefer to keep quiet about their existence but wouldn't let an old man and a boy be lonely on a station?"

"Well," said Pieter, straightening his top-hat, "who cares who's in the audience? We're a circus, aren't we?"



One of the newcomers to the genre, Dario Rukavina quickly established himself as a relevant author within the younger generation of Croatian SF writers. He was born in 1972 and lives in Zagreb.

Dario Rukavina

A PASSAGE TO THE EAST

It was morning and they were sailing the skies above the Atlantic when Mr. D'Alema rose from the table, went to the cheese platter, sliced a thick piece of emmentaler cheese, brought it back on a saucer, put it in front of himself, turned to Michael and said with a wink:

- The Universe is as curved and hollow as this cheese.

Michael looked inquiringly at his father, who did not so much as blink. He only wiped his mouth with a napkin and took a sip of coffee. Michael then turned towards his mother and asked:

- Mommy?

A knot of shame in the pit of Mrs. Moorcock's stomach swells each time a child comes to her with questions. They call her mummy, and they don't look at her while speaking to her but peek out the window in a jolly conversation with clouds, like, you know, I'm not really speaking to you, mummy, I'm just thinking out loud and if you do not want to be disturbed, *hell, that's okay*. Even the eldest daughter, Carol, rambles on and on while seductively twisting her neck towards a pair of young

aristocrats, who are silently encouraging her with meaningful glances over the edge of spread-out newspapers. If she did not respond to the children's whining, as if she were a kind of train station PA, he usually said, *Darling, restrain the children* or *But darling, why won't you answer them when they're asking so nicely*. She put butter and cranberry jam on his toast. Dropped a sugarcube into his coffee. Stirred it. Wiped Michael's smutty mouth and warned Carol to sit properly, as befits a young lady. Admonished Martin for smudging the zeppelin window with his fingers.

- What in God's name are you doing, Martin?

- I'm diverting a flock of birds from flying into a propeller... or over Russia - Martin responded in a heavy voice, as if he were putting a lot of effort in what he did. - I want to save them and earn some good karma.

The men at the next table were exchanging glances in silence. Mrs. Moorcock was afraid that they might be Russian anarchists. Such men, they plant bombs and kill innocent folk.

- Leave the birds alone, Martin... - she groaned, ill at ease. - How would you feel if your soul were in a bird, and someone on a zeppelin is disturbing you while you fly the skies freely?

Mr. Moorcock made a sour face.

- There goes your mother, Martin, with another bright idea. And they just keep getting brighter. There's no immortal soul trapped in a bird's body! - he leaned towards his daughter and muttered icily: Would you please shut up already?

- Let the children speak, my dear sir - Mr. D'Alema, the Italian industrialist, cut in again, - children are the ones closest to the truth, but I think that immortality is when someone does something that will truly make them *Immortal*. Take Einstein for example! -

Mr. Moorcock sat awhile clutching the edge of the table, then he took a napkin, wiped his mouth and said: - We are done with our breakfast. We are going to our room. - Fuming the entire way, he said that he had nothing to discuss with a bloody relativistic provocateur.

Zacharia Moorcock was a Teslocrat, Senior Supervisory Engineer, Second Class. He is traveling with his family to Croatia, on a pilgrimage to pay his respects to Nikola Tesla, the great inventor and founder of the League of Teslocratic Domains (LTD), and to receive a promotion. A Teslocrat of his rank, he hadn't had much chance to travel a lot, let alone argue with proponents of

Relativism. This was why Zacharia Moorcock wasted not a moment to cross swords with someone of their kind.

Around noon, Michael drove his remote control robot to the saloon door where the gents had been enjoying brandy and cigars as much as the bitter bickering about the warping of space, wormholes and the amount of energy required to open an interdimensional portal. He could hear his father shouting: I piss, beg pardon, my dear sir, on your exotic matter, ha, ha, ha.

His father was twitching most peculiarly, like his robot. His hand was pale as he clutched the glass feverishly, and he stared in anxious anticipation for the glass to burst into pieces in his hand.

During that time, Mrs. Moorcock and Martin strolled to the bridge. They did not care for these never ending squabbles amongst Teslocrats and Einsteinians at all. Dynamic theory or the Unified field theory?

Martin had decided that he would go into bird-observation business anyway, once he's grown. They were watching the tame landscape of Provence passing underneath, when suddenly a dove bumped against the open window of the ship's bridge, fell into the room and lay still.

- Don't touch that thing! - Mrs. Moorcock screamed at Martin as he was bending to observe the bird more closely. Even with her Teslocratic upbringing, she was deeply superstitious and her memory still rang with the words of her Nan, a

Romanian emigrant, saying that the bird flying into a room was an omen of death of a loved one. Disquiet came over her - the thought that the Russian nobles were in fact anarcho-terrorists capable of abducting her or, God forbid, blowing up the airship, saw her to her room, a bout of pill-popping and, *finally*, dreamland. After finding himself alone, Martin lifted the wounded bird gently up and hid it in his shirt.

Before lunch, the parlor debate was momentarily interrupted by a prima donna who was returning from a successful American tour and decided to treat them all to the Brunnhilda passage from Wagner's *Die Walkure*.

War es so schmähhlich aria was drilling painful wormholes in Mr. Moorcock's migraine, far more painful than the ones caused by Mr. D'Alema theory of ripping through the web of space-time continuum, when he noticed Carol missing. Sneaking out of the parlor, he found her accompanied by the young Russian. She was clinging to him like English ivy. Blood rushed to his head. He turned on his heel, stormed back to the parlor and threw himself in a seat.

- Your daughter, Adela... - he was hissing at his wife under the breath - She flirts shamelessly with that damn Russian lowlife! It's your blood, Adela... Balkan, gypsy blood!

After docking at Vienna, they took a short sightseeing tour of the city and some new passengers boarded. Upon leaving, they

were aghast to find out that Carol and the young Russian count were missing.

Moorcock was furious and insisted that the zeppelin should re-dock, but the captain led him to the radio-room and reported the disappearance to the police. Moorcock exercised his influence as Senior Engineer, Second class, to speak to the Vienna Police Commander himself, upon which he got firm reassurances that Carol would be discreetly escorted to Zagreb in the most expedient manner. That calmed him down somewhat. The web of Teslocratic agencies was widespread and strong, and nobody could slip through undetected - least of all, a big-mouthed American girl accompanied by a Russian anarchist.

A warm summer day welcomed them to Zagreb. They were staying at the Esplanade Hotel. They took a stroll around the Dolac marketplace and were delighted by the taste of štrukli. In the hotel, at the reception desk, they were handed a memo from the Vienna Police Dpt. which said they could pick up Carol at the train station, as she was arriving on the first train from Vienna.

The train noiselessly hovered over the tracks and Mrs. Moorcock brooded on the wonderful, romantic times when one could see lithe figures of men emerging out of the steam of a railway station. She loved railway stations, the old era, and the sterility of Teslocracy mortified her. Carol was escorted off the train by two agents, doped up on meds, her grin as wide as one on a

rag-doll's painted-on face. They boarded the train going to the town of Gospić, from where they proceeded to Smiljan and the Nikola Tesla Memorial Center.

Zacharia Moorcock got ready for the commemoration: he went through the ritual bathing and dove feeding, intoned guild chants at the temple, entrusted the patent officer with his most secret ideas. Michael was dressed in an azure jacket with golden epaulettes; he too would be attending the ceremony, going through his rite of passage and joining the guild's youth as Moorcock's successor. Michael shone as the midsummer sun, rubbing the robot with his sleeve, and then the Procurator of Teslocratic Youth rounded up the boys and led them into the Memorial Room.

The Memorial Room was thick with dusty hallucinations. Entering, Michael felt his life accelerating, coming off the walls - old photographs: New York docks, men in uniforms, special occasions, gatherings, cracks of happiness framed. Tesla and Einstein in an argument, Tesla and Swami Vivekananda in the lab, Tesla showing him the mathematical confirmation of Vedic scriptures. Tesla not giving over the contracts to Westinghouse, but giving them to his people. Coming back to Croatia. The speech in Zagreb. The people pooling in gold to continue his research. The promotion of the Dynamic Theory of Gravity. Receiving the Nobel Prize. Tesla donating resources for the reconstruction of the

Tunguska region. The Marconi trial. War. Squadrons emerging out of the forests of Lika armed with death rays. Hitler's factories burning, Pearl Harbor in flames, the scalar wave hits Tokyo. Tesla's United Nations speech. The dissolution of the UN Council. The founding conference of the Teslocratic bloc. Peace under the sponsorship of Teslocrats. Tesla retiring. Tesla feeding a white dove. Tesla's funeral.

Michael experienced a strange sensation while watching these images. It occurred to him that their sequence on the wall should not be changed. If they were disarranged, if those invisible threads of awkwardness were to break, whole worlds might perish. Slide on them slowly, as a spider, toward the center of all things.

Upon exiting the Memorial Room, they boarded the open-top scenic buses powered by aether, and were underway towards the Plitvice Lakes National Park. Somewhere along the way, Carol came to, drugs wearing off.

- Momma, momma, they shot him like a dog... - she started crying.

- Have no fear, dear child, you'll meet yet again, in some other, happier incarnation, - Adela whispered, reading the instructions for the proper dosage on a little blue box and smiling sourly at women as if waiting for their silent acceptance. Her words were drowned in the engineers' booming song which resounded in the front of the column, just to get wind-blown all

over the mountains of the Lika region. For a time, Carol regarded the astonishingly beautiful landscapes of Lika, the country of wolves and lakes, with a dull look, asking herself how it was possible that Tesla was born in such a backwater; a second later, she was sleeping like a log and she did not wake during the rest of the way to the Plitvice Lakes. There they joined the procession. On foot. From the topmost lakes, from one powerplant to the next, all the way to the main waterfall - the magnificent concrete monster where the dazzling ceremony was held.

At the end of it, they received a small chunk of concrete chipped off the powerplant - as a souvenir, a reminder of times past when each and every energy quant was needed for the young Teslocracy to survive; also that everything comes and goes and that nothing of this world lasts forever, save for great men and their ideas which will be written for all eternity in Akasha, the Great Book of Universe.

Zacharia Moorcock hugged his colleagues, said his farewells, handed out his business cards inviting them to visit him in America; Martin gathered crumbs for his wounded dove; Carol stared somewhere eastward with a glazed look, propped up by her mother; and Michael, eyes filled with admiration, watched his father.

His attention was caught by the stands along the pathway. On them, gold-cruled cheeses ripened.

- Mommy, look, cheese! - he cried.

A heavyset native of Lika, with a thick moustache, a wide toothless grin, a lopsided red cap and a sheep-fur waistcoat, sliced a chunk and offered it off the knife-blade.

- Mommy, it squeaks on the teeth! - said Michael, chewing.

And he was positively certain that the Universe was not as hollow and hole-riddled as the heretics used to say, but that it was bent and looped back, squeaking along the way, exactly as a Lika cheese.

(Translated by Miheala Marija Perković and Tihomir Maček)



Živko Prodanović

SF haiku

seven galaxies
seven great admirals
one war

golden birds of Orion
ineffectual running -
men have come

the space games -
bravo, the very first medal
for the Earth

worried keepers -
the ninth human being
ran away from zoo

robot's eyes
in the dark deepness's
a drop of oil

great revolt
robots disclaiming
to change their heads

the end of war
victorious robots
separating defeated

Aleksandar Žiljak

SCIENCE FICTION IN CROATIA

1. The Beginnings

Although the elements of fantastic and speculative (as far as science in the modern sense is concerned) in the Croatian literature can be traced back to the years immediately before and after World War I (for instance, the novel *Crveni ocean* (*The Red Ocean* - 1918) by Marija Jurić - Zagorka and some stories by Vladimir Nazor), it is generally agreed today that the first true Croatian SF novel was *Na Pacifiku 2255*. (*On The Pacific In 2255*) by Milan Šufflay, first serialized in 1924 and re-issued in a book-form in 1998.

In 1932, Mato Hanžeković published *Gospodin čovjek* (*A Man Of Rank*), a utopia about a group of people rebuilding the civilization destroyed in a new world war. Even more novels and stories appeared in Zagreb during the 1920s and 1930s, mostly by authors using pen-names, initials, or altogether omitting to sign themselves. Claimed by some authorities to be the best are *Muri Massanga* (1927) by Mladen Horvat and a series of novels by Aldion

Degal (most likely a pseudonym): *Atomska raketa* (*The Atomic Rocket*), *Zrake smrti* (*The Death Rays*) and *Smaragdni skarabej* (*The Emerald Scarab*), all dating from early 1930s. Also worthy of mention is the novel *Majstor Omega osvaja svijet* (*The Omega Master Conquers The World*) by Stan Rager, serialized in 1940. Stan Rager was a pseudonym used by Stanko Radovanović and Zvonimir Furtinger (whom we'll encounter later) writing in tandem. Very little is known of these texts today, most of them appearing in newspapers and magazines. They are seldom available and they need to be more thoroughly studied and critically evaluated. The same goes for some proto-SF works dating as far back as the Renaissance.

Better appreciated are the early Croatian SF comics from the 1930s. The first-ever was *Gost iz svemira* (*The Guest From Outer Space*) by Božidar Rašić and Leontije Bjelski, published in 1935 in Zagreb, followed by Krešimir Kovačić's and Andrija Maurović's *Ljubavnica s Marsa*

(*The Mistress From Mars*) and *Podzemna carica* (*The Underground Empress*).

2. Croatian SF Comes Of Age

Some SF stories by Croatian authors, still using pseudonyms, were published even during World War II. Immediate post-war years, with the war-winning Communist Party becoming the ruling political force in Yugoslavia and Croatia, represented a short lull in the continuity of the Croatian SF. However, the 1950s saw an increase in number of translated novels (by American, Russian and European authors) published by various Yugoslav publishers.

As far as Croatia is concerned, late 1950s and early to mid-1960s were definitely marked by Mladen Bjažić and Zvonimir Furtinger, writing in tandem. Both stemmed from the juvenile magazine *Plavi vjesnik*, where Bjažić was the editor, while Furtinger contributed stories (most notable being his SF novelette *Vila na otoku* - *The Villa on an Island*) and scripted comics. Their first collaborative effort was *Osvajač 2 se ne javlja* (*The Conqueror 2 Does Not Reply*), first published in 1959. *Svemirska nevjesta* (*The Space Bride*), *Varamunga - tajanstveni grad* (*Varamunga - The Mysterious City*) and the juvenile novel *Zagonetni stroj profesora Kružića* (*The Mysterious Machine Of Professor Kružić*) followed in 1960, *Mrtvi se vraćaju* (*The Dead Return*) in 1965 and *Ništa bez Božene*

(*Nothing Without Božena* - being an updated version of *The Mysterious Machine Of Professor Kružić*) in 1970. Well-written, these novels deal with cosmic catastrophes, aliens visiting Earth, artificial intelligence and robotics, and various machines, such as matter replicator and anti-gravity device. Character-oriented, action-packed and spiced with humor and fine irony, they often include elements of the mystery genre. Bjažić and Furtinger novels were the pioneering works in Croatian science fiction, introducing many new and fresh ideas and it is no wonder that they were very popular. Being reprinted several times, they undoubtedly influenced many fans and subsequent writers, which makes them even more important. Both Bjažić and Furtinger were very prolific authors of popular and juvenile literature, but Furtinger remained more faithful to SF, writing a considerable number of SF stories and radio-plays on his own.

After Bjažić and Furtinger, the second most important author was Angelo Ritig with his novels *Sasvim neobično buđenje* (*Quite an Unusual Awakening* - 1961) and *Ljubav u neboderu* (*Love in the Skyscraper* - 1965). As opposed to Bjažić and Furtinger, who were concerned with action and humor, Ritig was more interested in psychological development of his characters facing technologies such as brain transfer and a mind-reading device. It's a shame that he wrote only two science fiction novels,

because he was successfully combining mature literary style with interesting scientific speculations and convincing futuristic settings.

Silvije Ružić published the juvenile *Uspavani diktator (The Sleeping Dictator)* in 1961, while Milan Nikolić, otherwise a very prolific and skilful crime and mystery writer, ventured into SF with his 1960 novel *Zovem Jupiter ... Beležite (Calling Jupiter ... Take Notes)*.

Other Croatian authors of that period were mostly writing SF novels for children, the tradition continuing to the present day.

3. The *Sirius* Years

The crucial year in the history of the Croatian SF was 1976. In July of that year, the first Croatian SF magazine *Sirius* was started. *Sirius* was published by Zagreb newspaper and magazine publisher Vjesnik, one of the largest such companies in socialist Yugoslavia. It was started by Borivoj Jurković (its first editor) and Damir Mikuličić, no doubt inspired by a growing interest in SF manifested in Yugoslavia in the early 1970s. Despite severe economic difficulties in the 1980s Yugoslavia (resulting in inflation and chronic shortage of paper), *Sirius* maintained a regular monthly rhythm throughout most of the period of its publication, lasting until December 1989, when it reached issue number 163/164. It had a circulation

reaching 30 000 in its heyday, and was elected twice (in 1980 and 1984) the best European SF magazine. After Jurković edited *Sirius* for more than 100 issues, he was succeeded by Hrvoje Prčić, although Milivoj Pašiček was signed as an editor for some time.

Sirius was modeled after American SF magazines and published stories of various lengths, mostly by English-speaking, but also Soviet and European (particularly French) authors. In more than thirteen years, *Sirius* introduced the Croatian readers to the stories by the best SF writers in the world, authors both classic and recent ones. *Sirius* was also opened to various theoretical works, reviews, biographical texts, interviews and fandom news, and all this had considerable influence on the development of SF in Croatia.

Most important of all, *Sirius* offered Croatian (and Yugoslav) writers an opportunity to publish. Having the full-color cover and later even black-and-white story illustrations, *Sirius* also became a sort of exhibition hall of the SF art.

Several writers became well-known on the pages of *Sirius*. While Branko Belan and Zvonimir Furtinger were the best of those already established on the Croatian cultural scene (Belan was a film director and lecturer, as well as writer, and Furtinger was a journalist and writer, both being in their mid-sixties when *Sirius* was started), Predrag Raos was certainly the greatest

among the young writers beginning their career in *Sirius*. The most prolific *Sirius* authors were Branko Pihač and Živko Prodanović, and we should also mention Neven Antičević, Radovan Devlić (otherwise a comics author), Darije Đokić, Damir Mikuličić, Slobodan Petrovski, Zdravko Valjak and many others. The pages of *Sirius* also revealed the significant presence of women-writers, such as Vera Ivosić-Santo (a.k.a. Veronika Santo), Vesna Gorše, Biljana Mateljan, Vesna Popović, Tatjana Vranić and several others. We can state without any doubt that women publishing in *Sirius* were on the average superior writers to their male colleagues, both thematically and stylistically, particularly when their relatively small outputs are considered.

Although it is really impossible to draw any common denominator for some 500 Croatian SF stories (including short-short ones) published in *Sirius*, some trends are obvious. For instance, it's easy to notice a large number of anti-utopias, most often post-nuclear. This was an obvious comment on the Cold War, as well as the Yugoslav single-party socialist society. (We must point out, however, that socialism in Yugoslavia was much more liberal than in other East European countries, let alone USSR. Yugoslavia was not a member of the Warsaw Pact, and indeed maintained a delicate balance between West and East, being opened to both.) Other classic SF

subjects and subgenres were also present, such as space-opera, hard-SF, first contact, time travel and ESP. On the other hand, some of the then-popular subgenres were almost completely missing, such as cyberpunk. There was also a total lack of alternative histories and parallel world stories. Due to the strict editorial orientation towards SF, encouraged by contemporary readers, there was no fantasy or horror on the pages of *Sirius*.

Between 1976 and 1989 - years now dubbed the *Sirius* period - some very important SF novels appeared.

Predrag Raos published his two-part epic *Brodolom kod Thule* (*Shipwrecked At Thula*) in 1979. *Mnogo vike nizašto* (*Much Ado About Nothing*) followed in 1985 and *Nul effort* in 1990. *Shipwrecked at Thula*, almost 850 pages long, is the most important and possibly the best Croatian science fiction novel so far. Describing the utopian, but stagnant human society 600 years in the future that sends the first faster-than-light expedition to Alpha Centaury, and the disaster striking this expedition, it is brilliantly written and never boring despite its length. It is at the same time great literature and great science fiction, firmly based in sound scientific speculation. *Shipwrecked at Thula*, *Sirius* stories, *Much Ado About Nothing* (about an expedition to Mars) and *Nul effort* (about a space expedition caught in a middle of an intergalactic war) firmly established Predrag

Raos as one of the finest Croatian writers.

In the mid-1980s, Neven Orhel wrote two medical-SF novels, *Uzbuna na odjelu za rak* (*Alert At The Cancer Ward*) and *Ponoćni susret* (*The Midnight Encounter*). Branko Belan published the anti-utopian *Utov dnevnik* (*Ut's Diary*) in 1982, incorporating some of his stories previously published in *Sirius*. In the same year, Damir Mikuličić published a collection of his stories entitled *O*. Hrvoje Hitrec, well-known Croatian writer, published his SF novel *Ur* in 1982, and is also famous for his SF novel for children *Eko eko* from 1978. Some other mainstream writers also incorporated the SF and fantastic elements in their novels, most notably Pavao Pavličić and Goran Tribuson, two of the most prominent and prolific of several so-called Croatian Borgesians appearing on the literary scene in the early 1970s.

So far the only two Croatian SF movies also appeared in this period. The first was *Izbavitelj* (*The Rat Savior*) in 1977, directed by Krsto Papić and awarded at the Trieste SF Film Festival. The second was Dušan Vukotić's SF comedy *Posjetioci iz galaksije Arkana* (*Visitors From The Arkana Galaxy*), shot in 1980.

4. Future With *Futura*

The untimely death of *Sirius* in December 1989 is still mourned by many. Although there were rumors in the following

year or two that *Sirius* will be revived, nothing ever came out of it. In the meantime, the clouds of war were gathering over Croatia...

The early 1990s, marked by the fall of socialism and the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, seemed hardly an appropriate time for the *Sirius* successor. So it came out of the blue when, in late autumn 1992, a small Zagreb graphic design and publishing company Bakal introduced *Futura* to the news-stands. Less than a year after the war in Croatia was stopped by an uneasy cease-fire, and with war at full swing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, here we were, bewildered, holding a new SF-magazine in our hands!

Basically, *Futura* was not very different from *Sirius*. It was a monthly and it opened its pages to the Croatian artists and writers almost immediately. However, the times had changed. *Futura*'s circulation was much lower than that of *Sirius*. Denied the support of the major state-owned publisher and faced with a general drop in income and living standard in Croatia, *Futura* had financial problems. It changed several editors (they were: Vlatko Jurić-Kokić, Krsto A. Mažuranić, Mihaela Velina, Davorin Horak and Milena Benini) and was sold to another publisher several years ago. Eventually, it became very irregular, not appearing at the news-stands for months. Apparently defunct, *Futura* currently (July 2008) stands at issue number 129.

Futura had similar importance for the Croatian SF as did *Sirius*. It became the place where authors could publish. However, in 1995 *Futura* stopped being the only such place.

5. New Vibrations

In spring of that year, a new and important project in the Croatian SF was started. The SF-club SFera from Zagreb issued the first of their story-collections, entitled *Zagreb 2004* and edited by Darko Macan. *Zagreb 2004* collected stories by young (the oldest being 32) writers, about Zagreb 10 years in the future. The collection was actually prepared in 1994, hence the reference in the title, but was somewhat delayed, and the primary subject of the stories was obviously the war in Croatia, at that moment still unresolved. Although many featured writers had already published, mostly in fanzines and *Futura*, this collection proved that a new generation of SF authors had arrived. At the same time, it seemed that the *Sirius* generation had mostly faded away, at least in their capacity as writers.

Not that nothing was heard of them. Predrag Raos was vehement as a member of the opposition against President Tuđman's authoritative rule. However, only two of the books he published in the 1990s were true SF: *Mayerling* and the children's novel *Od rata do zvijezda* (*From The War To The*

Stars), both from 1996. Raos is also a well-known translator and controversial public personality, always opposing any authority. Zdravko Valjak collected his old *Sirius* stories in *Plastična duša* (*The Plastic Soul*), published in 1997. Živko Prodanović published the somewhat out-of-date *Tamara* in 2000 and *Smrt među rimskim ruševinama* (*The Death Among The Ruins Of Rome*) in 2003. Damir Mikuličić became an important SF and popular science (Einstein, Hawking, etc.) publisher. Neven Antičević, too, became one of the most important Croatian publishers. Vesna Gorše, also one of the *Sirius* writers, but today better known as an ethno-jazz musician, collected some of her stories in the book *Dar* (*The Gift*), published in 2003.

In the meantime, SFera continued producing its collections, timing them to coincide with the annual *SFeraKon* convention held in Zagreb. After *Zagreb 2004*, *Dnevnicima entropije* (*The Entropy Diaries*) followed in 1996. Then, there were *Kvantni portali imaginacije* (*Quantum Portals Of Imagination*), *Zagreb 2014*, *Krhotine svjetova* (*Fragments Of The Worlds*), *Dvije tisuće šarenih aliena* (*Two Thousand Gaudy Aliens*), *Jutra boje potopa* (*Deluge-Colored Mornings*), *Alternauti* (*Alternauts*), *Djeca olujnih vjekova* (*Children Of The Stormy Eras*), *Zagreb 2094*, *Kap crne svjetlosti* (*A Drop Of Black Light*), *Zagrob* (*Aftergrave* - a collection of horror stories), *Trinaesti krug bezdana* (*The*

Thirteenth Circle of Abyss) and, finally, in 2008, *Zmajev zlatni svitak* (*The Dragon's Golden Scroll*). The editor of - and the driving force behind - most of these collections was Darko Macan, alone or together with Tatjana Jambrišak and, recently, Darko Vrban.

Quantum Portals Of Imagination was edited by Davorin Horak, while Tatjana Jambrišak and Darko Vrban edited *A Drop Of Black Light*, *Zagreb* and *The Thirteenth Circle of Abyss*. They were joined by Mihaela Marija Perković for editing work on *The Dragon's Golden Scroll*.

Because of the careful selection and editing, these collections became the cutting edge of the modern Croatian SF. The stories published in them were on average much better than those in *Futura*, firmly establishing the new authors.

Interesting comparisons can now be made between stories in *Futura* and SFera collections, and those published in *Sirius*. The approach to various themes and subjects became more modern and diverse in 1990s.

Young writers now pay more attention to characters and plotline. The stories are no more used just as an excuse to elaborate some SF idea, which was a frequent shortcoming of numerous *Sirius* stories.

New generation of authors devoted more

time to literary qualities of their texts, employing modern storytelling techniques, some even showing tendency towards radical literary experiments. Finally, the 1990s authors freely introduced Croatian themes, characters and settings into their stories. Why was the majority (not all and not always, but majority nevertheless) of *Sirius* authors reluctant to do this, even when



appropriate, opting instead for stereotyped American and/or European characters or choosing some neutral settings, remains open to discussion. Whatever the reason, it seems as if the future finally started happening to Croatians in Croatia, and this is a considerable and very important quantum step, implying a further maturing

of the Croatian SF that took place in the 1990s.

One of the results of the SFera books was the spreading of the story-collection bug from Zagreb to Istria, so, starting in 2002, short-short story-collections were promoted at annual *Istrakon* conventions held in the small town of Pazin. These collections are: *Tvar koja nedostaje* (*The Missing Matter*), *Svijet tamo iza* (*The World Beyond*), *Bolja polovica* (*The Better Half*), *Ispod i iznad* (*Below And Above*), *Sami na svijetu* (*Alone In The World*), *Krivo stvoreni* (*Wrongly Created*) and *Dobar ulov* (*The Good Catch*). In the last three years, additional collections are prepared for the annual *The Festival Of Fantastic Literature*, also held in Pazin. The books appearing so far are *Vampirske priče* (*Vampire Tales*), *Priče o starim bogovima* (*Tales of Old Gods*) and this year's *Priče o divovima* (*Tales of Giants*).

Another story-collection, *Priča o Anđeli Novak* (*The Story of Anđela Novak*) was published in Osijek in 2006. In the past two years, Irena Rašeta edited story collections *blog.sf* and *Bludućnost* (*The Future Lust*), thus beginning an ongoing *TransSFuzija* (*TransSFusion*) series.

Beside *Futura* and the annual collections, there were several mainstream literary magazines where an occasional SF story could be found, particularly the defunct *Plima* that regularly published stories and plays with elements of the

fantastic. Since late 1998, short-short stories have been published in the juvenile Sunday-supplement of the *Jutarnji list* newspapers, and we must not forget various fanzines.

By 2003, ten years of writing and publishing resulted in enough material for some authors to plan their own story-collections. The edition *SFera* was initiated, with four story-collections: *Duh novog svijeta* (*Spirit Of The New World*) by Tatjana Jambrišak, *Purgeri lete u nebo* (*Burgers Fly Up To The Sky*) by Igor Lepčin, *Teksas Kid (i još neka moja braća)* (*Texas Kid (And Other Brothers Of Mine)*) by Darko Macan and *Slijepice* (*Blind Birds*) by Aleksandar Žiljak.

This project was continued in 2004, with another series of four books: *Najbolji na svijetu* (*The Best In The World*) by Zoran Krušvar, *Preko rijeke* (*Across The River*) by Dalibor Perković, *Čuvari sreće* (*Keepers Of Happiness*) by Zoran Pongračić and *Frulaš* (*The Piper*) by Zoran Vlahović.

Finally, in 2005, the third set of four books was published. These were *Jednorog i djevica* (*The Unicorn And The Virgin*) by Milena Benini, *Jeftine riječi* (*Cheap Words*) by Goran Konvični, *Zvezdani riffovi* (*Star Riffs*) by Krešimir Mišak and *Zeleno sunce, crna spora* (*Green Sun, Black Spore*) by Danilo Brozović.

This edition brought together twelve of the best and most prolific of the new generation of Croatian SF authors. It also spans the entire spectrum of interests and

themes covered in their stories. However, compared to writers in the West, the individual output of Croatian authors is quite small. The reason is simple: SF writing in Croatia is not commercial and cannot be turned into a profession. Therefore, it is merely a hobby for most of the authors. This also results in writers who show up with only a story or two and then disappear for good, a phenomenon observed as long ago as the *Sirius* days. Another consequence during the 1990s was almost total lack of true (much less good) SF novels. However, beginning with the new century, this started to change. Publishers, previously reluctant to publish Croatian SF, now show much more interest. This resulted in a steady stream of at least one or two very good SF novels each year.

In 2002, two SF novels appeared, both including considerable amount of humor. These were *Topli zrak (The Hot Air)* by Davor Slamnig and *Ja i Kalisto (Me And Callisto)* by Dejan Šorak. They were followed by two very good novels for children, *Prsti puni mora (Fingers Full Of Sea)* by Igor Lepčin and *Pavo protiv Pave (Paul vs. Paul)* by Darko Macan.

In late 2003, the best Croatian SF novel in more than a decade was published. It was *Sablja (The Sabre)* by Ivan Gavran. A fast-paced and superbly written space opera about a group of post-apocalypse Earth pilots fighting with their F-86 Sabre jets in a galactic air combat tournament, *Sablja*

remains a unique blend of space-opera, military SF and a sharp comment on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author being from Sarajevo.

Another excellent novel appearing in 2003 was *Christkind* by Boris Dežulović, otherwise a well-known journalist and columnist. In 2004, a three-part epic *Araton* by Oliver Franić was published, while Dalibor Perković published his first novel *Sva krv čovječanstva (All The Blood Of Mankind)* in 2005.

Predrag Raos also returned to the SF scene with his first major novel in years, *Vertikala (The Vertical)* from 2006, dealing with moral dilemmas faced by the designer of an orbital spacecraft-launch stratodrome. *The Vertical* was followed by two story-collections: *Škorpion na jeziku (A Scorpion on the Tongue)* and *Hrvatski bog s Marsa (The Croatian God from Mars)*. While *A Scorpion on the Tongue* collects three of Raos's best *Sirius* novelettes, *The Croatian God from Mars* contains humoristic SF, most of it previously unpublished, editorial censorship being one of the reasons. His 2007 fantasy novel *Let Nancija Konratata (The Flight of Nancio Konratat)* further confirmed his status.

In 2006, Veselin Gatalo published *Geto (The Ghetto)*, an action-packed allegoric vision of future Bosnia and Herzegovina. His 2007-novel *Cafe Oxygen*, while well-written, is probably best considered a juvenile. Danilo Brozović

caused quite a furor with his 2007 political cyberpunk novel *Bojno polje Istra* (*Battlefield Istria*), while Marina Jadrečić - well-known from the early days of *Futura* - published her story-collection *Tužna Madona* (*Sad Madonna*) in 2008. Two SF serials were also initiated in the past few years, one being Zoran Vlahović's cyberpunk-noir *Strijelac* (*The Shooter*), the other being *Lovina* (*Prey*), created by T.H. Knight (a pen-name) and Marin Medić and combining vampires and cyberpunk.

One of most important events in the last few years is the first collection of stories by Veronika Santo, titled *Vrt pramčanih figura* (*The Figureheads Garden*), published in 2008. While known from the pages of *Sirius*, Veronika Santo, now living in Rome, was absent from the Croatian scene for almost fifteen years, publishing sporadically in Serbia. *The Figureheads Garden* collects her most important stories, ranging in subjects from classic SF to Borgesian fantasy and firmly establishing her as one of the finest Croatian story-tellers, with very

few peers indeed.

As far as other speculative fiction genres are considered, fantasy is represented by several novels so bad they don't even desert mentioning. Two notable exceptions are juvenile *Čudesna krljušt* (*The Miraculous Scale* - 1995) by Zvezdana Odobašić, and fantasy spoofs by Vanja Spirin.



Horror scene is somewhat more lively, with the most prominent and prolific author being Viktorija Faust (a pen-name), dubbed “the first lady of Croatian horror”. Beside numerous horror and SF stories (collected in several collections), her novels include *U anđeoskom liku zvijeri* (*In The Angelic Image Of The Beast* - 2000), *Neizgovorena priča* (*The Untold Story* - 2005), *Nasmrt preplašen* (*Scared to Death* - 2005) and *Anastasia*, as well as numerous books on supernatural.

Denis Peričić collected his horror stories in *Krvavo* (*The Bloody*), published in 2004. In 2006, Zoran Ferić drew a lot of attention with his novel *Vampir* (*The*

Vampire), inspired by actual events. Zoran Krušvar's novel *Izvršitelji nauma gospodnjeg* (*The Executioners of Lord's Intention*) from 2007 developed into a multimedia project, involving heavy metal bands and video artists. Darko Macan ventured into juvenile horror with his 2007 novel *Dlakovuk* (*The Hairwolf*).

6. Translations, Art, Comics, etc.

Some fifteen to twenty SF, fantasy and horror novels, almost exclusively by American and British authors, are being translated annually into the Croatian language. Despite the 1991 - 1995 war, books published in Serbia were also available through various channels. Naturally, the choice of imported books (exclusively in English) is much larger.

The SF art, being tied to book and magazine covers, is not particularly developed in Croatia. Several artists created quite an enviable amount of artwork on the *Sirius* covers, the best being Miroslav Sinovčić, Vjekoslav Ivezić and Igor Kordej. Among the artists producing in some quantity in the 1990s were Igor Kordej, Esad T. Ribić and the author of this text. Karlo Galeta and Robert Drozd monopolized the *Futura* covers for several years with their 3D computer-art. A much better computer artist is Goran Šarlija, while Miljenko Zvonar produced a large body of SF art, illustrating the already-mentioned

Jutarnji list's Sunday-supplement stories. Željko Pahek also returned to the Croatian art scene, working mostly in Serbia before the war. He is famous for his SF-art, but also for his hilarious comics, spoofing almost every SF-cliché known to mankind.

We have already seen that the tradition of SF comics in Croatia dates back to the mid-1930s. During the 1950s and 1960s, the best SF-comics authors were brothers Norbert and Walter Neugebauer, who also started their career before the Second World War. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, the best new authors were Radovan Devlić, Igor Kordej, Goran Delić and Krešimir Zimonić. During 1990s, the situation with comics in Croatia was poor indeed. No comic magazine succeeded in running regularly and for any period of time, so the scene was mostly oriented towards fanzines and school-magazines. Foreign comics translated into Croatian were also quite sparse. Things have recently improved considerably, however, with new SF comics being translated into Croatian in ever-increasing numbers and magazines gaining some hold. More important, the Croatian comic artists have a relatively long tradition of working for foreign publishers. This continued in the 1990s with the breakthrough on the American market, mostly in the franchise-universe and super-hero series by Dark Horse, Marvel, Antarctic Press and DC. The best-known writer in this field is Darko Macan, while

the art was produced by late Edvin Biuković, Igor Kordej, Goran Parlov, Esad T. Ribić, Goran Sudžuka, Milan Trenc and Danijel Žeželj.

The SF-theory work was - until very recently - sporadic at best, but we must mention Darko Suvin here. One of the world's foremost SF theoreticians, he was born in 1930 in Zagreb, but, after editing the anthology *Od Lukijana do Lunjika (From Lukian To Lunik)* in 1965, he continued his career in the USA and Canada from the late 1960s.

7. F Is For Fandom

The organized fandom in Croatia dates back to 1976 (the year of *Sirius!*), when the SF-club SFera was founded in Zagreb. It was followed by more clubs, including the *StarWars* and the *Star Trek* club. As is usual, these clubs have been involved in convention-organizing and fanzines-publishing, the oldest fanzine being SFera's own *Parsek*, started in 1977. *Parsek* reached issue #100 in April 2008, thus being by far the longest-running fanzine in Croatia. Considering the current absence of a monthly magazine, the importance of *Parsek* exceeds that of a regular fanzine.

Perhaps the true phenomenon of the Croatian fandom are conventions. At this moment, Croatia has annual conventions in Zagreb, Kutina, Pazin, Opatija, Rijeka and Osijek. To these, one must add gaming

conventions and LARP events, as well as the *Jules Verne's Days* and *The Festival Of Fantastic Literature*, both held annually in Pazin.

SFeraKon in Zagreb is the oldest convention in Croatia, running from 1977. It is organized by the SFera club and is now held on the last full weekend of April at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences in Zagreb. *SFeraKon* attracts up to 1000 visitors (other conventions are smaller), offering the usual convention program, lectures, movies, costumes and gaming, as well as being an opportunity for fans and professionals to meet and exchange ideas. *SFera Awards* are also given for the best SF stories of various lengths, plays, novels, art and life-achievements. These are the traditional annual awards, first given in 1981.

In recent years, *SFeraKon* invited quite an enviable number of foreign GOHs, including Martin Easterbrook, Gay Gavriel Kay, Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber, Walter Jon Williams, Lois McMaster Bujold, George R. R. Martin, Ken MacLeod, Michael Iwoleit (German writer, editor and translator), Michael Swanwick, Bruce Sterling and Richard Morgan. This is a continuation of good international relationships maintained during the 1970s and 1980s, when names such as Frederik Pohl, Jack Williamson, Brian W. Aldiss, James Gunn, Bob Shaw, Richard D. Nolan, Sam J. Lundwall, Joe Haldeman, Paolo

Eleuteri Serpieri, Gianfranco Viviani and Gerald Webb visited Zagreb and/or Croatia, either as *SFeraKon* or *Eurocon 86* guests, or on some other official occasion.

Istrakon in Pazin is now firmly established as the second-largest Croatian SF convention. Held in March, it is now running for six consecutive years, and is attracting some 500 visitors looking for a lot of fun and good times in the beautiful surroundings of central Istria. *Istrakon* begun inviting foreign GOHs in 2006, the first being Brian W. Aldiss, Juliet McKenna and John Anthony West. *Essekon* in Osijek is also a convention with some tradition, while *Liburnikon* in Opatija and *Rikon* in Rijeka are rapidly establishing themselves as popular events. Unfortunately, *Kutikon* in Kutina seems defunct, but there are news of new conventions and events being planned all over Croatia.

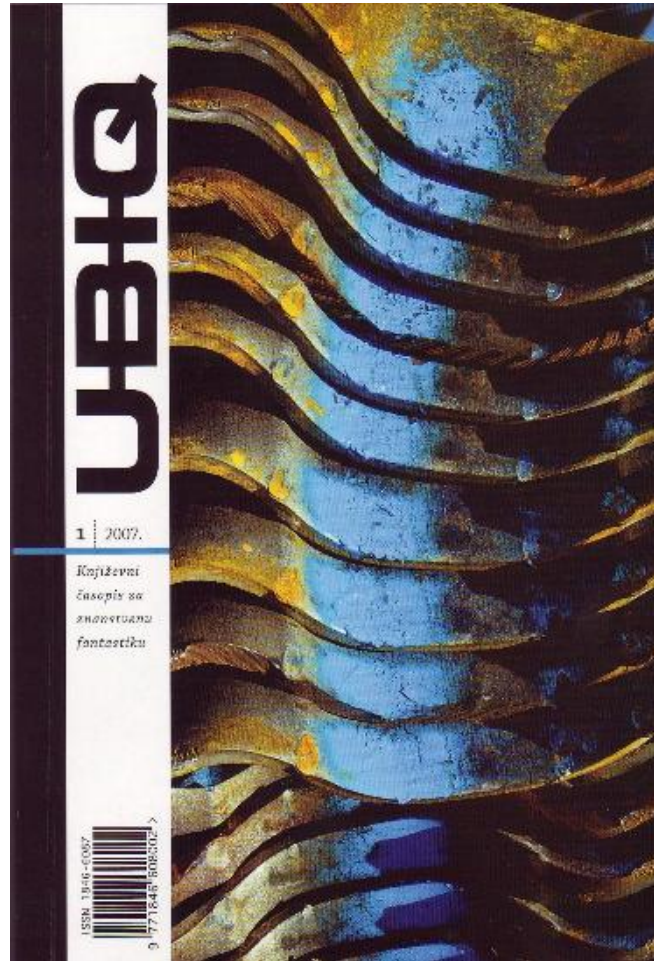
The spread of Internet provided a further impetus to the growth of the Croatian fandom. There is a number of web-sites and forums dedicated to all aspects of speculative fiction in the broadest sense, and there is also a marked rise of the blog scene. Besides the usual fandom communication, the Internet scene in general supports new aspiring writers, through on-line magazines (most notably, *NOSF* - www.nosf.net), on-line literary workshops and blog-stories, thus alleviating the present lack of a regular (semi-)professional magazine.

8. Fast Forward Into Future

Science Fiction is now becoming accepted as part of Croatian popular culture. The history of SF in Croatia includes two long-running magazines, important annual story-collections, numerous author collections and several good novels, all appearing under difficult, if not severe, economic and political conditions. Indeed, younger people in Croatia, including the author of this text, spent most of their lives living in some sort of crisis, culminating, but not ending with the 1991-1995 war. Several authors are now well-known and established on the Croatian SF scene, and the next logical step - already taking place - is their breakthrough into the international market.

A process of thorough evaluation of the historic development of SF in Croatia is now under way. The first major step was *Ad Astra*, an anthology of the Croatian SF story from 1976 to 2006. This mammoth 640-page book was edited by Tomislav Šakić and Aleksandar Žiljak and published in April 2006, after two years of work. It contains 40 stories by the most important Croatian SF writers. Also included are theoretical and historical texts, biographic notes on authors and other prominent characters in the Croatian SF, as well as the reasonably complete bibliography of the Croatian SF story in the aforementioned 30-year period.

Another problem addressed by the editorial tandem Šakić-Žiljak is the lack of professional-looking SF magazine publishing Croatian authors. While *Parsek* partly filled some vacuum created by the *de facto* closure of *Futura*, something better was needed. Thus, in November 2007, the first issue of *UBIQ* was introduced to the public. *UBIQ* is a 260-page literary magazine devoted (at least for a time being,) exclusively to Croatian writers. It also publishes theoretical and bibliographical texts, thus creating a completely new and desperately needed niche. Two issues are planned annually. *UBIQ* - issue 2 appearing in April 2008 and issue 3 scheduled for November 2008 - brings high-quality stories and serious essayistic works by prominent Croatian writers (including the come-backs by veterans such as Veronika Santo, Branko Piháč and Vesna Gorše, as well as established and new-generation authors such as Danilo Brozović, Kristijan Novak, Tereza Rukober, Irena Rašeta, Iva Šakić-Ristić, Zoran Vlahović, Milena Benini, Dalibor Perković, Jasmina Blažić



and others) and theoreticians, most famous being Darko Suvin. Although small-press and state-sponsored, *UBIQ* already caused quite a commotion on the Croatian literary scene, getting very favorable reviews and, apparently, finally drawing the attention of the so-called mainstream and academic circles to the science fiction. While the future of *UBIQ*, within non-paying small-press limits, now seems assured, only time will tell what its ultimate reach will be. *UBIQ* cannot alleviate the lack of a regular monthly magazine, which currently seems to be commercially completely unfeasible. What *UBIQ* can do is provide space for contemporary Croatian SF prose and

theory. There are ambitions for the expansion of this project, but they will ultimately depend on available funds, and a step-by-step approach is the only one possible at this moment.

In the meantime, we hope this text, with all its shortcomings, will provide the basic insight into the past, present and possible futures of the Science Fiction in Croatia.

THEY SAID ON CROATIA...

Lois McMaster Bujold, USA **2002 SFeraKon GoH**

"(...) In Croatia, I seemed to actually be taken perfectly seriously as a writer. This seems to be something of a national habit -- I saw more statues put up to writers than to generals in my ambles around the city. I can only approve.

(...) Usually, a visiting writer is insulated from knocks and jars by their anxious hosts, but it was pretty clear to me that Americans are actually welcome in Croatia. For anyone who's considering a Mediterranean vacation, I would recommend they take a look at the Istrian and Dalmatian coast; the water is clear, the seafood is splendid, and an astounding number of people speak at least some English. With some good will and an English-Croatian dictionary, I suspect one could get along rather well. And for history buffs, well, there's a feast of Greek, Roman, medieval, and other sites to see.

(...) I was continually impressed by my Croatian hosts' command of English. In

part this comes from their interest in SF, as only a fraction of the available work gets translated into Croatian. Croatian SF readers are just as avid as all others I've met, and would soon run out of books to read if they didn't sharpen their foreign language skills. In turn, the exercise improves their English, to my benefit; I felt I was able to carry on high-level and complex conversations about Sfnal and literary topics with little constraint practically throughout my stay.

(...) To my surprise, we didn't bother with translation; all the attendees were expected to follow along in English, which, judging by the questions in the Q&A part, they were well able to do. I'm still deeply impressed that we could fill the room, a hundred to a hundred and fifty people, random fans, all speaking a second language well enough to carry on these complex conversations. Anyway, the interview seemed to go well..."

<http://www.dendarii.com/croatia02.html>

Ken MacLeod, Scotland

2005 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) The centre of Zagreb looks very West European: Austro Hungarian buildings, red tiled roofs on the houses, and the odd sixties or seventies office block. A few hundred metres in any direction from the centre and it starts to look more like your typical commie downtown, except with brighter neon and better stocked shops. Many of the shops are Western chains, others date back to the Kingdom or the Empire, and some are survivors from the socialist era. (...) South of the river is Novi Zagreb, all post WW2 and mostly huge - and not at all identical - apartment blocks many of which seem to have a ground floor of small shops and cafes.

The general feel of the place is pretty laid back. People dress smartly and behave politely and are friendly. You couldn't ask for nicer. Croatia is both Catholic and nationalist, but relaxed about it, in the style of the Irish Republic today rather than in the thirties, or even modern Poland. (...)"

"(...) We left with a very warm appreciation of Croatia, and of its fandom. Croatia used to be a popular holiday destination, and is becoming so again. We certainly intend to come back."

<http://kenmacleod.blogspot.com>

Michael Swanwick, USA

2006 SFeraKon GoH

"Croatia is beautiful, small, egalitarian, a great place for sidewalk cafes and wandering about in Roman ruins and still-functioning Venetian cities, but possessed of a complex and terrible history. And the food is terrific. Marianne and I stayed for several days in an small apartment just within the Silver Gate of Diocletian's palace in Split and while there I imagined my favorite characters, Darger and Surplus, arriving on a packet boat hauled into the harbor by plesiosaurs. We'll see if I ever get around to writing that one. I'd be tempted to set something in the Plitvice Lakes, a long and magical valley containing literally hundreds of waterfalls, but Marianne is convinced that Terry Pratchett beat me to it with "Thud".

No toasts, but we did discover that Croatian men like to sing a capella in the bars - exquisitely melancholy old songs in multi-part harmony. If angels went slumming, this is what they'd sound like.

Mostly, though, I liked the people. Good folks, fun to hang out with, and some of them are great storytellers."

http://scififantasyfiction.suite101.com:80/article.cfm/call_me_prolific

Richard K. Morgan, England

2008 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) Zagreb in fact turns out to be this small, mostly sunny and incredibly beautiful little city on the slopes of green hills, littered with gorgeous Austro-Hungarian Empire architecture, thronging with cheery blue, clanging trams and full of laid-back, friendly people. (...)

Culturally, Croatia was for me (and even more intensely for my wife Virginia, who is Spanish) a weird combination of very familiar and very alien. There is an attitude here to family and to food which is pure Mediterranean. Kids are the centre of attention everywhere, eating is an important aspect of life (rather than just the fuelling up it tends to be in the UK) with thriving open markets for fruit and veg, broad arrays of (*genuinely* - check out the eyes) fresh fish and seafood, and everywhere buyers and sellers who want (and have the time) to *talk about* the produce as if it actually mattered what you put in your stomach. To this extent, it all felt very much like being back in Spain. But at the same time there's a dash of something far more north European in the slightly sober-looking coffee houses, the well behaved traffic, the more sedate, quieter pace of things when compared to the frenetic speed and volume that Spain likes to

operate at. And of course there's the language - Croatian, helpfully lettered in Roman rather than Cyrillic characters, but still a million miles from a Romance tongue, full of harsh slavic sounds and peppered with a selection of loan words that I sometimes recognised from my very rusty Turkish. It's fascinating to read (well, look at) and listen to, but it's not a tongue I had any confidence about getting easily to grips with. My publisher concurs - it is, apparently, incredibly grammatically complicated (as it seems are most slavic languages), with endings for everything, and the antique declensional complexity of Greek or Latin. We spent the whole six days we were there eternally grateful for the high levels of English speaking competence among the Croatians we met."

<http://www.richardkmorgan.com/news.htm>

Walter Jon Williams, USA

2001 SFeraKon GoH

"(...) I was guest of honor at the Croatian national convention, held in Zagreb, and the object of an enormous amount of warmth and hospitality, for which I remain grateful."

<http://walterjonwilliams.blogspot.com>

Dalibor Perković and Boris Švel

CROATIAN SF CONVENTIONS

SFERAKON

Where: Zagreb

When: last full weekend in April

Organised by: SFera

Typical attendance: 800+

<http://www.sfera.hr>

<http://www.sferakon.hr>

The oldest and biggest Croatian SF convention. The first convention called "SFeraKon" was held in 1983, but SFera had been organizing similar events - officially and unofficially - since it was formed in 1976. In 1986, SFera hosted Eurocon with Sam Lundwall as a Guest of Honour. Today, SFeraKon hosts distinguished foreign GoHs and is more inclined towards the "serious" type of programme: lectures, panels, presentations and a yearly SFERA Award ceremony for best Croatian SF. In addition, during the last fourteen years SFeraKon visitors who attend full three days also get annual collection of Croatian SF stories included in their membership fee. However, there are also quizzes and games for those with a more relaxed approach to SF. SFeraKon is also

renowned for its film programme, where people can see up to 20 films ranging from obscure and bizarre to the non-commercial works of art, usually hard to reach.

ISTRAKON

Where: Pazin, Istria

When: mid-March

Organised by: Albus

Typical attendance: 400+

<http://www.istrakon.hr>

If Zagreb has the strongest convention, Istrian is the most beloved one. The first Istrakon was held in 2000 as a part of "Jules Verne days". Today it is a self-standing convention whose popularity among the Croatian fans is immense. Istrakon has strong Istrian flavour, but also started hosting foreign GoHs. Although there are many lectures and panels about SF and F, Istrakon's young team of organizers also likes to keep their guests entertained by an abundance of games, shows and quizzes.

RIKON**Where:** Rijeka**When:** early October**Organised by:** 3. Zmaj**Typical attendance:** 150+**<http://www.3zmaj.hr>**

The most important autumn destination for Croatian fans. In the last couple of years, RiKon firmly established itself as the third most important convention in Croatia. Convention has a diverse programme with a bit of everything.

ESSEKON**Where:** Osijek**When:** early November**Organised by:** Gaia**Typical attendance:** 100+**<http://www.gaia.hr>**

Over the years Essekon (called after the old Hungarian name for Osijek - Essek) is in constant danger of turning into a gaming convention, but the organiser have been resisting it so far, so there is always some literary SF programme included.

KUTIKON**Where:** Kutina**When:** February**Organised by:** SFinga**Typical attendance:** ?

Kutikon had its brightest days during the mid-90s. Today, it is mostly considered defunct, but there may always be some pleasant surprises.

LIBURNICON**Where:** Opatija**When:** late July**Organised by:** Kulturni Front**Typical attendance:** 100+ and growing**<http://www.kulturnifront.hr>**

The youngest and reportedly very enthusiastic convention started two years ago as "Abbacon", with just right mix of entertainment, literary events and popular science. Being held at the peak of summer tourist season is a mixed blessing, however.



