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EDITORIAL

Dear reader,

"Parsek" is the oldest Croatian fanzine, first published in 1977 and still running. It is also 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 a fan club. The annual SFeraKon convention, organized by SFera, attracts nearly a thousand fans each year, and the SFERA Award (I know, the spelling bothers me, too) is awarded in several categories. Now, let me introduce you to the Croatian SF, with the little help of SFera's cute (oh, well) official mascot, Bemmet.

Enjoy!

Boris Švel

In Zagreb, 10th August 2010

"Parsek" on net:

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

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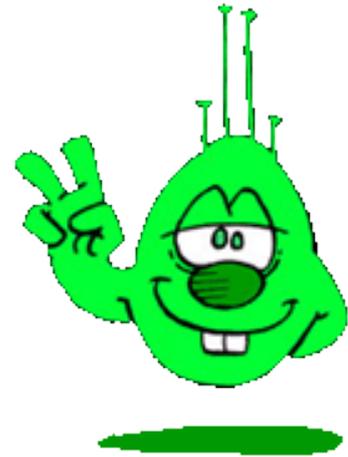


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One of the foremost Croatian SF authors, Aleksandar Žiljak was born in 1963 and resides in Zagreb. He won SFERA Award six times, equally excelling in illustration and prose, as well as the editorial work, being the co-editor of the new Croatian SF literary magazine UBIQ.

Aleksandar Žiljak

SEX AND DEEP-SEA ANGLERFISH

"What was I thinking, marrying a biomecha designer?"

"And what was *I* thinking, marrying an ichthyologist?"

"May I remind you", Yagoda replies in her sweetest voice, "that without *this* ichthyologist here, you would be dead now."

"And may I remind *you*, my dear", Peter answers, irritated, "that without *this* biomecha designer here, *you* would be dead, too."

Arguments exhausted, Yagoda and Peter sink back into silence. Recently, this is becoming a frequent end of their quarrels: a stalemate with both of them being right. Is there some hidden message here, Yagoda wonders as she works her tail fin vigorously, pushing them through the completely black water. Time to look for some chow, she decides after ten minutes of stubborn silence, it's been two days since she last ate. They'll both be in a better mood with her stomach full ... Suddenly, Yagoda freezes in

tense anticipation, stopping dead in the dark surrounding them.

"You feel it?", Peter asks in low voice.

"Shut up!", Yagoda snaps at him. Unnecessarily: no-one can hear them, all their arguments and discussions and quarrels are strictly between them, thought but never voiced. And then, the pressure of the water hits them, sending unmistakable stream of alarms tuning all Yagoda's nerves to the maximum, ready for that one critical fin stroke that means difference between life and death.

Something big passes them. Close, too close for comfort. Huge: five, maybe six meters long. Probably a local equivalent of some deep-sea shark, Yagoda decides, although she cannot see it. Swift, deliberate, searching, ready to pounce, ready to snap its jaws at the slightest hint of something edible. But, this time something big swims away into the darkness, missing them.

"Maybe we're too small", Peter whispers as if anybody can hear him.

"Just you hope", Yagoda knows better. No meal is too small this deep. They were lucky, that's all, the only explanation.

"What was that, anyway?", Peter whispers.

"I don't want to know."

* * *

People say the seventh year is the most critical one. Their marriage was falling apart at the tender age of three.

Why? Even now, when it became completely pointless, Yagoda still tries to find an answer. If Yagoda didn't get pregnant, would Peter really marry her? On recollection, their relationship didn't look like something permanent. A good-time summer, hot bodies in hot sheets in steamy nights. But then September came and September menstruation didn't. When she confronted him with a positive test, Peter felt obliged. Some old chivalrous impulse, quite rare today, that surprised even Yagoda. Now, surrounded by darkness, she thinks she finally understands. Peter is quite older than she is: perhaps a child was a reason for him to settle down at last, one final opportunity to start a family. And as her pregnancy went on, he really began looking forward to that boy.

And then Yagoda miscarried, spontaneously. Their joy was flowing out in

blood, in an ambulance wailing all the way to hospital.

Peter was a biomechanoid designer. And a biomecha designer can either work in industry, or set off on his own, freelancing across the Galaxy, from job to job, fulfilling commissions and designing biomechanoids to suit whatever task somebody requires on some distant planet. Usually small series, but there's an occasional major job, quantities running into thousands or tens of thousands. It pays well if you're good and if you're lucky. Peter was somewhere in the middle: not good enough to be on top, not having luck that bad to go bankrupt.

Yagoda was an ichthyologist, fresh after graduation and apprenticeship. The best she could hope for was to land a routine job at some mariculture station or oceanographic institute. There were offers, some quite good. But, after the loss of their child, Peter didn't want to stay in one place. And he didn't really care if Yagoda would come with him or not. He never said that, never blamed her or anything, but a woman can feel it and Yagoda felt it. At that time, Yagoda cared if Peter didn't. So she came along.

And while *Hans Rudi* was not a small and crowded ship, you cannot exactly slam the doors behind you and vent your frustrations in a pub across the street. So, the frustrations piled one atop another. Words, spoken and otherwise. Fights. About small things, discarded socks or empty sweetener

container or toothpaste left opened. And bigger things. Costs of running the ship. Bills for purchasing DNAs. A cancelled job that almost ruined them. Frustrations growing into resentment, resentment growing into anger, anger into hatred.

And then, in the course of one of their shouting matches in the ship's kitchenette, when Yagoda found herself holding a frying pan to throw it at Peter, she realized it was time to sit down and talk. Peter agreed, finding himself holding a plate to throw it at Yagoda. So they sat down and talked. And talked. And talked some more, saying things neither really wanted to say. They were deep in the Mlokosziewicz space, running along one of the probability trajectories to Wistary, when they decided divorce was the best way out of the mess they were in.

Exactly three minutes and thirty-six seconds later, for reasons unknown, their Mlokosziewicz drive croaked.

* * *

Was there some hidden message there, too, Yagoda asks herself as she dangles her luminescent lure above her wide agape mouth, filled with needle-like teeth, ready to snatch anything foolish enough to come close to investigate the attractive glow.

* * *

They jumped out into normal space, *Hans Rudi* spinning wildly, totally out of control. Without force compensators to maintain the internal up and down, Yagoda and Peter would have been turned into bloody blotches long before reaching the cockpit and strapping themselves into seats. The ship slowed down to subrelativistics, still spinning, speeding towards a star system. Typically, Peter wanted to find out where the hell they were. Also typically, Yagoda was more concerned about the fusion reactor cooling system being way verloaded.

That would have turned into another shouting match, but the quarrel was made academic by the main power section being automatically jettisoned, only to vanish in the blaze of thermonuclear explosion several second later. What remained of *Hans Rudi* was switching to auxiliary power, speeding, still hopelessly out of control, past the outer planets and towards a tiny blue dot.

Tiny blue dot turned out to be a planet, eighty percent of its surface covered by ocean. Truth is, Yagoda and Peter had eighty percent probability of hitting the water. But, there was still that twenty percent probability of hitting the hard rock.

That was the first time their luck held. The splash was big. The hull got breached on several places, water rushing in. They started to sink, fast and deep. Yagoda and Peter barely reached the design lab and sealed its doors behind them. Scratch that

one about luck: they were imprisoned in the lab, in the sinking ship, with lights showing intent to go out at the slightest provocation, and computer screens alternating between snow and unreadable streams of data, none of them good news.

The ship shuddered as it hit the bottom, the already overstrained structure screeching and moaning like a banshee, the hull settling down with a loud thump. Yagoda and Peter knew options were very few. Mostly on how to die.

* * *

They did die. In a usual sense of the word, at least.

Light in the lab held. So did the rest of the environment, at least for the time being. But there was no food and tap water tasted too much like sea. And system failures were inevitable, they both knew that. Peter rebooted the computers, lab's LAN was up and running, but outside connections were gone.

"Can we open the view hatch?", Yagoda asked, already running all the possibilities through her head. Peter punched few keys on his console and the outer shutters slid open. Pitch black greeted Yagoda through the thick glass, as black as the Mlokosziewicz space itself.

Yagoda cursed through her teeth. They hit the daylight half of the planet.

Black outside meant only one thing: they were too deep for sunlight to reach them.

"We're not going to make it, you know", Peter said resignedly. "It'll take them at least a week to figure we missed our ETA. Even then, where can they start looking? And everything is screwed up, we cannot ..."

"Shut up!" Lately, Peter was prone to resignation, and that usually infuriated Yagoda. "I'm thinking!"

* * *

"Well honey, you're not going to win any beauty prize!" The thing in the pressurized container resembled a grotesquely inflated bag, 70 centimetres long, with big tailfin and luminescent lure above big mouth filled with sharp teeth.

"You're not looking any better, dear", Yagoda replied, wiping sweat from her forehead. The environment was failing, little by little. But it gave them precious two days to finish two biomechanoids. The ugly big black fish was hers. Peter's was mere twelve centimetres long, pale and twisted-looking, attached to the big black fish's belly, their tissues and blood systems already fused. "But they'll do just fine."

"I don't like it, you know. Connected like this. Maybe I should have ..." Yagoda drew him a specification modelled after *Ceratias holboeli*, a deep-sea anglerfish they had among their DNAs. Every biomecha

design starts with some existing species, and perhaps it was Yagoda's ichthyology background that made them buy so many fish samples. And deep-sea fishes are handy when it comes to designing biomecha deep-sea probes.

"I'm telling you, that's how these fish couple! Once male meets female, or vice versa, he attaches to her permanently. Sometimes even several boys on a single girl. And they stay that way for life, male or males completely fusing with female, fed through her blood system. From that point on, the males are just sperm sacs."

"Well, thanks a lot!"

"Look, if we ever get separated out there, there's no way we gonna find each other again, get that? Why do you think the male attaches in the first place? Because it's probably the only time in his life he's going to come across a female. Are implantations done?"

Programming semi-consciousness and implanting it into a biomecha is a standard procedure, necessary for making a basically wild creature actually do some useful job. But the standard equipment they had in the lab was sufficient to scan and transfer the entire brainwave pattern of a person, too. That was something everybody knew was possible, but seldom anybody did. Peter mentioned only one or two cases he ever heard of. Well, Yagoda mused, time to join that exclusive club, her brain pattern recorded into the big fish and Peter's into

the little one. And there were two more things Peter added at her request: internal communication system and their DNAs stored. Just in case somebody *does* look for them and does find the wreck. Bioluminescent lure should be enough to signal some Morse codes.

"They're done", Peter answered.

"OK. Then there's only one more thing to do ..." Yagoda took a deep breath and hit the button. The lab doors opened. Chilling water burst in, flooding the lab quickly, rising to their chests, turning them painfully numb. On one thing Yagoda and Peter agreed: it's best to do it fast. Once the water filled the lab, the biomecha container was to open automatically, releasing them into the black.

Last thing Yagoda saw before lights went out and she and Peter sank into darkness was herself, her ugly fish self, gazing back at them with cold, indifferent eyes as they gasped for their last breaths, frantically reaching for something, anything, before finally finding each other's hands and squeezing tight, finding some comfort in each other.

* * *

"Two days ago, we were talking divorce", Peter muttered as the container opened.

"Two days ago we weren't thousand meters deep", Yagoda replied, lighting her

lure and swimming below two floating bodies holding hands. She tried not to look at them as she swam through the doors and into the corridor, looking for the nearest hull breach.

"Well, now we're together till death does us part."

* * *

Something big passes them. Yagoda and Peter float speechlessly, tied forever, fused into one, waiting for something big to swim away. And then something big turns and Yagoda knows it's after them this time. No time to think how and why, she darts aside and huge jaws miss them by a fraction of an inch. But, something big is hungry and attacks once again.

Yagoda tries out-swimming it, she should be more manoeuvrable, but something big is fast, very fast, and Yagoda feels the big mouth opening behind her, sharp teeth ready to cut her in two. She does a sudden left turn and something big misses again, jaws snapping into empty. Yagoda keeps swimming, something big does take more time to turn and if she could put some distance between them, maybe she'll reach the safety of the wreck. They kept close to the wreck all this time. On purpose, staying close to the wreck is SOP in case of crashes. And the wreck provides shelter, if only she could reach it.

Luck is again with Yagoda and Peter: something big decides to quit the chase. Every predator knows instinctively when it's over, when the food obtained will not cover the energy wasted. Yagoda slows down and waits, ready to start again. Several minutes pass in tense silence. But, something big swam away, looking for meal somewhere else.

"This was close", Peter sighs with relief as Yagoda calms down.

"Sshhh", Yagoda says, becoming still, very still.

"What now?"

"Shut up!" Yagoda feels some small ripples close before her and decides to take a chance. The chase was costly and she needs food. They both do. So she lights the lure and starts waving it. Blue light floods into blackness. A small crustacean-like critter swims to it, attracted, multitude of hairy legs working in unison, long antennae flicking around, hoping for some tasty plankton snack and not noticing the big mouth waiting. And then, in an eye-blink, it's over. Jaws open and shut, and crustacean is no more. Hungry, Yagoda swallows it with relish.

If you don't eat, you're eaten. If you're not eaten, you eat. An incessant cycle of the sea. And Yagoda and Peter surviving in it, by wits and luck - with more luck than wits - but surviving, together, tied into one.

"Mmmm, crunchy!", they both agree.

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

A CHILD IS BORN

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity with actual persons is purely coincidental. Mythical persons, however, are fair game. You have been warned.

The time is the present. The place is... well, it's all relative, anyway.

The lights turned green, but the cars didn't move. Mary slammed the horn once, twice, three times in sheer frustration, then turned to the back seat.

"How are you doing, Maggie, dear?"

Maggie dear muttered a curse through clenched teeth. Her black hair was sweat-stuck to her forehead, and she was clutching her large, nine-months-and-two-days pregnant belly. She was half-sitting, half-lying, and half-doubling over in pain (okay, so how well would *you* do in maths in such a situation?).

"I'm fff...ohmygooooood!" she answered.

Mary shook her head. "Don't waste your breath, Maggie, dear. He for one sure won't help us. You're an... embarrassment to him, sweetheart, don't you see?"

The girl in the back seat puffed and huffed and the labour cramp blew away.

"I didn't mean it like that, Mama Mary," she muttered tiredly. "Just about any god would do right now."

Her next scream was heard several cars away, despite the horns and the curses that are the inevitable Greek choir to any traffic jam.

* * *

In one of those cars, Ariadne lifted her head from her knitting. She was knitting a green kid's sock.

"What was that?"

Her husband was head-banging to the beat, probably the only smiling face in the whole traffic jam. "*One* by Metallica," he said over the wailing guitar.

"Not that. The scream."

"That's what I mean, too."

"There," said Ariadne. "There it is again." She put down her knitting and turned down the CD sound.

"Oh, gooooooood!"

"You hear?"

Her husband shrugged. "So? She could mean anyone."

"Of course she could, but you should go look, dear."

"Why?" He was casting longing glances at the volume button of the CD.

Ariadne's knitting needles started clicking again. "Because that's what we do, baby. We answer calls."

"Do we have to?" He pushed a needle aside with his hand. "You'll poke my eye out one of these days with these things," he said. "And I didn't even get to do mum beforehand. You really should give it up. Knitting all the time, it's not healthy. And it's not as if it's any use..."

Ariadne looked at him with her eyes slitted. "It *is* of use."

"Only because you give those baby things away."

"Only because I have no baby of my own."

Her husband sighed deeply. "Ari. We've been through this so many times. I'm just not cut out to be a parent. And, besides, you really don't want *another* child at your hands." His smile really was winning, but Ariadne pretended not to notice.

"Go see what that screaming's about," she said instead.

* * *

The knocking on the car window came just between two of Maggie's screams. Mary turned the window down an inch or two or three, and saw a mass of blonde curls, somehow wild despite the drizzle around them, hiding a smiling face.

"Yes?" she said suspiciously.

"Good evening, ma'am. I couldn't help overhearing..." The man's voice was as sweet as Macedonian wine (T'ga za jug). It only made Mary more suspicious.

"Who are you?" she interrupted. He cleared his throat.

"Lo!" he said. "I am come to this land, Dionysus of name, the son of a certain gentleman whose name I really shouldn't mention, of whom on a day Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, was delivered by a flash of lightning."

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, whatever."

Ariadne's husband huffed and puffed, but blew nothing away. "Ma'am, you really shouldn't treat me that way. I've been known to take offence."

"It's not that I have nothing better to do than sit around and listen to your genealogy, you know," said Mary. "My daughter in law's about to give birth - and in the middle of a traffic jam, too!"

"Nevertheless, a little..."

"Baby!" Ariadne's voice wound its way through the labyrinth of horns and curses. "Remember what your therapist said about rage control?"

Her husband took a deep breath. And another. And a third. "Fine," he said. "I'll let it go for now." He chanted quietly: "I know I can, I know I can, I know I can..."

"And can you do something about us, too, or were you just curious?" asked Mary. On the back seat, Maggie was clawing at the upholstery and cursing her hippie boyfriend under her breath.

"Well, what can I do?" asked Dionysus. "I mean, what would you want me to do?"

Mary shook her head as if she were dealing with a moron. "Well, it would be nice if you could get rid of all these cars blocking us," she said. "We really need to get to the hospital quickly. Poor Maggie's due the day before yesterday, and I for one am not having my grandchild born just anywhere. *I* settled for a sty, and look where it got me!"

Dionysus shrugged. "Well, I can do that," he said, and reached for his cell phone. It was a sleek, silvery model with a lightning over the flap.

"No!" Ariadne leaned from the car window. "Don't call your dad, baby. I'm sure the lady didn't mean you to blast the whole lot to smithereens."

"But, a surgical strike..."

"Your dad's idea of a surgical strike is taking a whole city out with one lightning bolt and you know it, baby. *Not* a good idea, believe me." She looked at Mary. "You have

to excuse him, ma'am. He means well, but sometimes he just doesn't get things right." Her look clearly said: *so like a man*.

Mary shook her head. "I know how it is. Look at the men in my family: they all just wham, bam, and then disappear without so much as a thank you, ma'am. One justifies himself with having a whole universe to run - he can run the universe all right, but changing the boy's diapers, oh, no, that was too much for him, he never was one for hands-on management." She looked at Maggie, huffing and puffing at the back seat. "And what does his son do? For 33 years he lives off my back, and when he finally finds himself a nice girl, he has to go and get himself crucified because 'daddy told him so!'"

Dionysus patted her shoulder. "I know how you feel, ma'am. I come from a broken family, myself."

His wife snorted. "Don't forget to mention that you did a fair amount of that breaking yourself, baby."

Maggie started screaming again. Dionysus scratched his curls.

"I suppose turning into a lion is also out of the question?" he muttered.

Ariadne shook her head.

"Well," said Dionysus, "in that case, I don't see... I do see!" his face lit up, like a child that saw Spot run. "I could infest all the drivers with my madness."

Ariadne sighed. "And that would be good because...?"

"Well, don't you see?" A horn seemed to serve as underscoring for his

pronouncement. "I could then lead them away, over sidewalks and tram tracks, and so clear the way."

Mary squinted around with suspicion. "Is there enough room?" She exchanged looks with Ariadne. "What do you think?"

Ariadne was opening the car door to get out and take a better look, but her husband didn't wait for their verdict. He went to the back door of Mary's car and opened it.

"Good news, miss," he said leaning in, then stopped. "Um", he said. And then: "Um." And: "Um."

Maggie grabbed his hand and squeezed, hard.

"Ari?" Dionysus' voice was very small and confused. "There's all this water here." He was trying to get away, but Maggie's clutch was too strong. "I do have an uncle who's an expert on water, so to speak..."

"Aaaaaargh!" said Maggie, logically. "You're a goddamn god!" she shouted. "You better help me - NOOOOOW!"

Mary and Ariadne were both outside the car, trying to see what was going on inside. For a moment, Dionysus seemed petrified with indecision - so much so that even his curls were getting wet and losing their all-weather Taft shape.

Maggie again said what she was mostly saying all this time.

"Stand back!" shouted Dionysus to the two women behind his back. "Make room!" He dove back into the car. "Don't you worry," he said. "We'll get this baby out fine. Just push! Now!"

"Aaaaargh!"

"Push! Breathe! Push!"

Maggie got her breath back momentarily. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Dionysus was rummaging under her skirt, tearing cloth. "No idea," he said. "That's what they shout in the movies. But I'm figuring, you or the baby or both will have a, watchamacall it, instinct or something, right?"

Instead of answering, Maggie said... you know.

"There," said Dionysus. "I've made room for the little one. All I have to do now is make sure it doesn't hit its head on the sidewalk when it gets out, right?"

Ariadne was on the phone, calling 911. Mary was clucking worriedly and rummaging in the car booth, getting the baby things out. Even the rain stopped, and the traffic jam cleared. In a moment of silence, the newborn's cry was heard with strange clarity.

"There we are," said Dionysus. He turned to Mary. "And here's your granddaughter."

The little girl was, of course, gorgeous as all newborns are, purple and wrinkly and loud like a cirrhosis-infected liver with an attitude problem.

Maggie was panting in the car, no longer in pain, and the wail of a siren was heard. 911 was about to appear and work its magic.

Ariadne reached into their car and took out her knitting. "A good thing I just finished

these," she said, proffering a pair of tiny green socks to Mary. "They should come in handy."

Mary looked at them. They had two large toes, as if they were knitted for something... with hoofs.

"Such things always come in handy," she said.

Dionysus was panting too. His hands were bloody; he wiped them on his Nirvana T-shirt before shaking hands with Mary.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I didn't do anything anyone else wouldn't do. Or even couldn't do."

She smiled. "I know. But sometimes doing just that is the truly god-like thing to do. Believe me, I know a few things about gods." She frowned. "From personal experience."

She got into her car. "Well," she said to Maggie. "We'll have to think of a name, won't we? It'd be silly to have a third Mary in the family."

Mary Magdalene nodded, but didn't respond. Her daughter was smiling at her.

* * *

Dionysus got back into the car and started it. Ariadne got in next to him and put her knitting gear to the back seat.

"What?" he said. "You're not knitting?"

Ariadne swallowed a sigh. "I'm giving it up. It's no use. You've said so yourself."

They drove a little while in silence.

"Dear?" said Dionysus in a small voice at the next red light.

Ariadne was staring through the window, chin on her fist. She didn't turn around. "Mhm?"

"You know," he said. "I've been thinking..."

"You have?"

"Well, now that I've given birth... you know... metaphorically speaking, I was thinking..."

This time, she did turn around. "Yes?"

The light turned green, and the cars started moving, but theirs didn't. Ignoring the angry horns and the curses that are the inevitable Greek choir to any traffic jam, Dionysus turned to the back seat and took Ariadne's knitting needles, then pushed them awkwardly into his wife's lap.

"It is, too," he said, and started the car. His favourite song started on the CD: *Jeannie's got a gun* by Aerosmith.

He turned it up.



Being a trained engineer, Zoran Vlahović excels when it comes to the good old-fashioned hard science fiction. As one of more prolific Croatian authors and a SFERA Award winner, he lives and works in Zagreb.

Zoran Vlahović

TAX CASE

The attorney stood up with faked self-assured smile. He felt much less calm than he showed... This was a *much* more important case than simple lawsuit.

If this cause is lost, the **SFL** - in which he held quite a stake himself, being one of the founders and members of the inner circle - shall foreclose forever.

The future of the firm was at stake. Even worse, the very breakthrough into the space could come into question, therefore the survival of the mankind, speaking in the long run. But he could not *say* so, without showing to be a naïve idealistic fool or a sorry crackpot.

Some profit would remain, and a hefty sum would come through the sale of shuttles and docking facilities in the elliptic orbits... And that was almost for sure someone's (probably government's) interest behind this "anti-trust" lawsuit. The governments never rejoiced at the development of private

businesses in the fields that used to be *their* monopolistic domain. If the **SFL** goes down the drain, the government will take its assets over, for a fraction of the cost.

Trying not to seem nervous, he turned with a nod, first towards the tribunal, and then to the prosecutor. The attorney addressed the little gray man from the Tax Authorities: "Could you, *please*, explain the legal basis of your claim for the payment of... as you formulated yourself, of *the accrued profit tax*?" He tried not to sound too impertinent or cynical, for he could be found in contempt of court, but making clear what he really thinks of the matter.

The faceless civil servant, whose all bearing read "assessor" or "desk flier", seemed honestly perplexed by the question: "But you make *profit* on your product!"

There you are, the attorney thought. *Never say OUR product. We never said so.* He countermanded: "The product *we sell*, if

you please. As we have not invested a single cent in its development or production, there is no basis for us to claim it as *our* product... or for anyone else, for that matter. The product was there for millennia and we can freely say that it can be found in unlimited quantity."

Quiet titter could be heard from the audience, the things so far went well. The attorney continued: "By our exploitation we harm no-one". He noted several jury members covertly smiling and suppressed his own grin: "Not to mention that the **SFL** is not incorporated as *manufacturing*, but *transport* company and is not registered to produce anything. Furthermore, as the all of as-you-say profit from return payload or 'profitable cargo' is deducted from the costs of the ascending orbital cargoes, the said 'profit' is a mere legal fiction."

"What's more, the term 'product' could perhaps apply to the containers in which the so-called product is delivered, but they constitute the registered parts of our vessels, subject to charter that merely covers the prime cost of the new ones in case of loss. The **SFL** makes no revenue on the return cargo, so - automatically! - there is no profit!"

That was not the real truth, or at least not the complete one. The profit made on the *product* was piped into the research of additional reduction of costs of ascending and out-of-atmosphere flights.

Because the flights *had* to become cheaper, and even cheaper. For the simplest thinkable reason: people had to cast off of this clump, if they wish to survive... As long as all people inhabit the one planet, just *one* big rock incoming, or a madman with a bomb large enough, is all that takes to make us all goners.

But the budgets were shrinking, and a couple of not that important, but spectacular disasters like *Discovery's*, forced governments - if they invested any money at all into the space exploration - to reduce the launches to programs like *Traveller* probes. The probes that slowly circled the Solar System, gathering data, every few decades re-entering orbit of Earth for refit... The automatic, *robotic* probes, the probes that left people down, in "safety".

So the "inner circle" of dreamers founded the **SFL**. For *the cause*, as well as for the self interest. They didn't want the perfect pictures of Saturn rings, or virtual drive by the telefractor on the wastelands of Pluto or Mercury. They wanted to get there, regardless of dangers and insecurities! To *touch* the stones and rocks untouched by any man before, to *see* the sunset on Titan, to *watch* Charon ascending, or conjunction of Jupiter's moons... They considered themselves (perhaps incorrectly) as the last dreamers.

And they were willing to fight for their dream.

They found the legal loophole that enabled them to channel the money and make profit to turn the flywheel of progress fast enough so they could make their dream come true during their lifetime.

Of course, he could not say that either.

All this train of thoughts was running for just a glimpse of an eye since the attorney finished his last sentence. He sent a charming smile towards the jury, then to three judges: "I hold our case clear. The statement of claim for tax on non-existent profit can be judged in one way only."

He believed in the case, as well as in the **SFL**, and speaking objectively, the tax prosecutor's final pleading was long, tiring and incoherent, with reference to hazy precedents relating to the evasion of service and information taxes, realistically having no connection with this case. To put it straight, he was boring. But, still...

If the state really decided to take over the **SFL**, and if the judges hold their dearer than the ethical substance of the justice... Then all bets are off and rules went down the drain. Too soon, almost two years too early. *Icarus*, lying in an inconspicuous high-orbit docking hangar, was not yet ready for flight... Most components were still in the factories, waiting for free space amongst paid ascending cargoes.

If they loose, they can only...

No, there was no point in following the dream into death, in an uncompleted

vessel, with unreliable life support system. He was wondering, somewhere deep inside where he could not lie to himself, will others share such opinion, or some of his visionary friends will prize their dream more valuable than life in safety? And should they be pitied or envied?

The 3D-journalists waited almost as impatiently as the attorney. One of the judges unwound the old fashioned paper with jury's verdict. As the presiding judge conferred sotto voce with the other judges, the attorney almost collapsed. He gritted his teeth instead, smiling coolly. He pulled the collar of his trendy sporty-conservative leather jacket (the leather was ecologically acceptable again), standing up to listen the judgement with self-assurance he didn't really feel.

The presiding judge read the recitals, the names of the judges and the jury, the name and title of the prosecutor, the name and title of the defendant, the names of the attorneys and their powers... Finally he got to the verdict.

"According to the judgement of this Court, the **SFL** is in no violation of any law, tax or anti-trust or other, so it can supply its customers with the cheapest *vacuum* on market."

(Translated by Boris Švel)

One of the younger Croatian authors, Ivana D. Horvatinčić quickly established herself, writing both fantasy and horror stories. She lives and works in Zagreb, and is a SFERA Award winner. Actually, the Award was given for the very story below.

Ivana D. Horvatinčić

POST MORTEM

So, finally I died.

Not that I ever wished for it or, God forbid, tried to do something that would hasten my own judgment day. Ever since I could remember, I have been afraid of death and nothing could ever scare me more than the thought of this frightening shadow constantly looming over my head.

There had been days when I simply couldn't pull the chains of my morbid thoughts off, even though I'd harness all the strength I could find in me and employ every force I could think of. None of the forces had ever answered my pleas nor my humble, shameful fear. None of them had deigned to help me - so eventually I just stopped asking.

In some weird way, death was a relief. I wouldn't say it brought me the so frequently celebrated "peace of mind", I discovered no "meaning of life" nor any other rubbish people tend to believe in.

For me, death brought a victorious sense of being right - every doctor who had ever tried to convince me that chest pain I had been regularly experiencing did not have an organic basis, that the attacks of intolerable fear and choking sensations could be attributed to a thing called panic disorder, that my body was all right... Every doctor who had told me such things had been wrong.

I was merely twenty-five, and I died all the same, leaving behind... hm...

Well, to be honest, I didn't leave much behind. Few years of law school, a roommate who was high all the time and probably didn't even notice I hadn't come back to our apartment, parents who didn't particularly care about me, a girl whom I was seeing with no real commitment... As far as I knew, I hadn't even knocked up anyone.

No, wait a minute... I left behind my huge collection of movies and computer

games, the kind any decent Playstation and DVD Player addict would envy me on.

Having remembered that, I almost wished to return back into the world of the living. Almost, I said, because now, when I finally crossed that fine line between life and death, the realization that I won't have to be afraid any more was just dawning on me - and it was too alluring. Still, the thought of my roommate misappropriating my DVDs and games bothered me a bit. I would have sighed if I weren't so damn transcendent.

It wasn't bad. I was floating little below the ceiling of the OR and watching the guys in green robes trying to push life back into me with their rubber gloves and miraculous syringes and electroshocks and stuff like that - just like in the most cliché "near-death experience". I was wondering - was all that real or was it just an illusion, a reflection of all books I read and movies I watched, left behind in my little grey cells.

Well, whatever it was, I decided not to return into my motionless body, even if that meant losing the illusion and drowning in the nothingness. Life wasn't worth all the pain and fear I knew about. Besides, I liked floating around and being ethereal, having a body - one completely intangible and transcendent.

Down below, something began to squeak monotonously. I frowned, and then something else drew my attention away from the irritating squeaking.

By my left side, a luminescent light was glowing. Its rays were incredibly bright and clear, almost as if they were drawn. Here it is, it's starting, I thought with thrill, thinking about all those "near-death experience" stories I had read. I couldn't wait to go through the light and walk (or should I say float?) into the beautiful world of the afterlife.

Naturally, I lost any interest in my dead body which was being covered with a white sheet beneath me.

I moved towards the light, staring into it with curiosity, not at all surprised by being able to do it without blinking and eye pain. After all, what else could have surprised me? I was dead! Someone appeared in the center of the light, someone looking human, and then left the bright luminescence. When he came closer to me, I noticed it was a young man dressed in a long white gown. He was overwhelmingly beautiful and had I ever had any homosexual preferences, I would have immediately started developing a crush. But I didn't like guys in that way, so I could just observe he was beautiful like... like... like some piece of artwork, I'd say - but then again, I hadn't seen much artwork during my life (and those I had seen were too unintelligible and uninteresting), so...

"Are you an angel?", I asked when he approached me. He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Do you see any wings?", he pointed at his back.

"Okay, no wings, but everything else is here. The light, the white gown, the fact that I am dead..."

"Typical", he sighed again, in a rather frustrated tone of voice. "Well, at least you realize you are dead."

"Is that weird?"

"You'd be surprised. Come on, follow me."

He led me into the light and my heart would have been pounding wildly with anticipation had I still been alive.

The light did blind me a bit, so I closed my eyes tightly and didn't open them until I heard my guide who seemed bored.

"You can open your eyes now."

And I did.

The sight before me left me overwhelmed - or should I say shocked. It was not even close to what I had expected.

This enormous, grey city was all around me. The network of long two-storey buildings seemed to be infinite as it reached as far as my eyes could see, blending afar with the grey sky which wasn't cloudy, but simply grey as ashes, with no sun, no moon, no stars. All the buildings were exactly the same, dirty shade of grey, with windows hidden by grey curtains and doors made of grey steel. The streets were grey too and I couldn't see a single tree or piece of paper tossed away - there was absolutely nothing

but those buildings and streets and the gruesomely grey sky.

In short, as if I've left the movie that was in color and entered a weird, artistic black-and-white one.

I couldn't see any indication of population. A dead silence ruled the place and even the air was somehow heavy, almost as if it was grey too. Although I didn't have the need to breathe it, it seemed to be sticking in me, making me grey from inside too.

I was disappointed when I realized I was not blissfully transcendent any more - I was in average human form again. Nothing was hurting, I had no need to breathe nor did my heart beat, but the body was here, exactly the same as it was when I left it in the OR. I even wore the same clothes as in the moment of my death. Furthermore, my skin was a somewhat unhealthy grey. Either that color was common for dead people or I had started melting in with the world around me.

I glanced at my guide, whose gown also became grey. Oddly, his hands and face were still white and beautiful, completely out of sync with the surroundings.

"I must have sinned a lot, for you to have brought me here", I murmured, still recovering from the shocking revelation. He seemed confused for a moment, but the bored expression soon found its way back on his face.

"What you did during your life has nothing to do with this", he replied. "There is no final judgment. You all come here."

"Oh", my beliefs, nourished for the most of my life, suddenly collapsed. I mean, it's not that I was ever a devout altar-boy who spent his Sundays in church, but I still kind of believed I was good enough to deserve some nice kind of afterlife. My life was difficult and painful, so death simply had to be better than that, right?

Well, apparently not.

"Okay, so now what?", I asked, not without ill temper. Beauty next to me frowned with some disgust.

"Your unrealistic expectations about afterlife are not my fault", he said, his voice inane, as if he had to say it for millions of times. "The sooner you accept the situation, the easier it will be for you to spend the eternity here."

I shuddered. Spending the eternity in such a grey repulsive world didn't sound encouraging at all.

"Perhaps, if you could tell me more about this... this place...", I suggested meekly. I didn't want to piss him off even more - after all, he was the only thing I could grab onto.

"Okay", he nodded. "I did intend to tell you about it anyway while I'm taking you to your room."

"My room?"

"Yes, these buildings are here for a reason. You do not require food or drink,

you have no human needs, you don't even need to sleep... But, everyone has their own room because the human need for privacy is the only need left intact after death."

"And what's in the room?"

"Nothing. What should be there?", he looked at me as if I were crazy. I sighed, having remembered my collection of movies and games again.

"Well, I don't know, something for fun..."

"Fun? Well, if you want, you can watch other mortals, but believe me, it is usually very boring", my cheerful face, lit up by the thought of all women I'll be able to watch while they shower, made him roll his eyes. "Yes, the human need for voyeurism remains intact after death... You'll get bored soon."

Doubt it, I answered mentally, happy because I found at least one good thing in the midst of all the grey.

We were walking through a long, straight street which seemed to have no end, it was so monotonous that it made me feel hypnotized by our rhythmical steps and extreme invariability of the surroundings. All the windows were hidden behind curtains, all the doors closed. And I still haven't seen anyone but the two of us.

"Why does this city seem so abandoned?", I asked. "There is not a single trace of life."

"Maybe because this is the City of the Dead?", he shot me an almost deadly glance.

"Yeah, but... Why does everyone stay in their rooms?"

"Most of them have no need to leave their rooms."

"Nonsense!", I frowned, displeased. "No wonder this place is so bleak and boring when everyone is so... dull."

"Everyone said that when they were brought here, you know."

I shook my head.

"Okay, so what about you? You bring dead people's souls here, right? You said you're not an angel, although your job description matches those of an angel. What are you then?" A weird sparkle appeared in his eyes and for the first time he seemed interested in the discussion.

"Have you ever heard about Svantevid?", he asked. I shrugged.

"The name sounds familiar, but only vaguely", I said honestly. He sighed with discontent.

"Typical", he murmured. "Well. I am, you should know, Svantevid. One of ancient Slavic deities."

"A god?!", I was stupefied. So I was dead and I did say nothing could surprise me anymore, but the horrific grey city certainly surprised me, and so did the fact I was walking next to a real god!

"Used to be", he sighed with well calculated melancholia. It seemed a bit theatrical, as if he practiced the telling of the story many times. "I was one of the powerful Slavic gods, a full member of the

Pantheon that owned the entire Slavic territory, and you know how large that was."

Of course, I had no idea, but I said nothing.

"We were quite a team - Perun, Bojana, Gerovit, Lada, me... Always causing fracas against the Greek gods who believed they were better than us. You know, I was different then. I lived with the others in Svitogor, the House of Gods, at the top of the World Tree, and I was a Sun God, the most powerful warrior, flying with a flame sword and a horn filled with wine and mead, on Krilas, my white clairvoyant horse..."

Svantevid was now completely lost in his nostalgia. I was beginning to feel sorry for him.

"I even wore four heads on my shoulders to see on all four sides of the world... Some tribes even thought of me as a supreme god... And in Svitogor, Perun and I stood by the side of Svarog's throne as his most celebrated adjutants... Your people had special reverence for me, you know", he glanced at me. "You Croats called yourselves the Sun People, my people."

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"Many Greek legends were changed to weaken our fame in favor of Greek gods. Even the contest between Apollo and me in the glow of sunrays was turned into the beauty contest between Athena, Hera and Aphrodite. It doesn't matter. Those were altogether magnificent times. Maybe I

should tell you some anecdotes to illustrate, so you get the proper idea."

I wasn't really interested, but I didn't want to offend him, so I said nothing. Svantevid had been totally transformed into an energetic, passionate story-teller and it was the only beautiful thing I have seen in the City of Dead so far. And having a friend who is coincidentally a god in such a place couldn't hurt.

"Telling some anecdotes to illustrate" turned into a long monologue by Svantevid which gave me all information I ever wanted, as well as some I did not, about his brothers Perun, the God of Thunder and Storm, Tatomir, the clever Moon God and Stribor, the God of Winds. There was also a story about a huge war between gods and giants in which Svantevid, Tatomir and Gerovit, God of War, lead an army of Gods which won in the end, after Tatomir persuaded the giants to fight in the sea which somehow made it harder for giants. As far as I understood, the Kornati islands in Adriatic sea were made from defeated army of giants and named after the giants' fallen leader but Svantevid was talking like a freaking poet so I couldn't be sure.

And when he started to talk about his rivalry with evil god Črt, he didn't stop for hours, it seemed. I could summarize the entire story in this: Črt stole Svantevid's girlfriend, Dawn, and took her to his dark kingdom. Svantevid managed to get her back after long and exhausting battle, and he

finally defeated Črt in a duel, at the end of the long war between the light and the darkness.

In short, he was telling me all those fairy tales, and I had died as an adult, not as a child.

His stories began to tire me and I was wondering how far is my room - we've been walking for a very long time, and I still couldn't see the end of the street.

"So how did this happen?", I interrupted. "You taking dead people here, I mean."

He sighed deeply, agony on his face.

"It is the worst part", he said. "Being here, having this stupid job, while I can still remember my former shiny, divine life... Don't you get it? All of us, gods of the Slavs, gods of Greeks, Egyptians, Celts, Nordic gods and all the other gods... We all coexisted in peace or sometimes in war, we had our people whom we protected and who revered and praised us... And then, somehow, people forgot us and stopped believing in us. With that, we lost our meaning. And we weren't needed anymore."

"Okay, but what about all the people who died while you guys were in charge? Someone had to bring them here."

"Use logic, human", he sighed. "They haven't been brought here. As far as I know, this place didn't even exist then."

"Where did the dead go then?", I was honestly confused.

"Charon was taking dead Greeks across the river Styx to Hades, except those lucky ones who spent enough time during their life flattering gods to earn themselves the eternity in Elysian Fields. Dead Celts went to Avalon, dead Nordic warriors to Valhalla, and our Slavs to Nav. When we became unnecessary to humans, things suddenly changed, a lot. All the dead were transferred here and all those places that used to host afterlife ceased to exist."

"Why?"

"Your questions are really stupid", he frowned. "How should I know? I only do what I must. I am not a god anymore, remember?"

"Well, what are you then?", I was starting to feel impatient. I still didn't understand some of the things he told me about and as soon as he stopped talking about his famous past, Svantevid returned to his usual frustrated self.

"I am still a deity, but I am not a god."

"What is the difference?"

"It is too abstract to explain. Among other things, I can't make any important decisions. If I could...", he muttered with displeasure, "I most certainly wouldn't choose a job like this one."

"Let me guess - other gods got better jobs", I remarked sarcastically.

"They did!", he raised his voice, obviously angry now. "Especially those Greeks! Ares and Apollo and Aphrodite and Zeus... Most of them are in management,

some of them even do the same things they did back then. The Muses still have the job of inspiring people. Ares still manages wars. Zeus still plays with his lightnings. And I am stuck in this stupid City of the Dead", he was muttering again, lowering his voice as quickly as he had raised it. "And all that because people turned them into a tourist attraction and a product to be exported."

"Fine, but who is above all this? Who brought such decisions, created this place? Is there a real...", I almost whispered, "... God?"

"You're asking someone who has nothing to do with the mentioned one because he is on the very bottom of the chain of command", he was cynical. "Yes, there is the supreme Power which is above all of us, but I don't want to talk about it - and I mustn't, for that matter. Anyway, we've reached your room."

We stopped and he showed me the first door on my right.

"First floor, first door on the right side of the stairway", he said and then just disappeared. Struck by such a sudden end of the conversation and the lack of instructions about what was I supposed to do for eternity, it took me a few moments to get it together. Then, I sighed and entered the building.

Grey stairs and grey walls, of course. A grey door, a grey room with empty walls, a grey floor and grey curtains on the window... The thought of having to spend

eternity in that room made me want to scream. I firmly decided I would search the entire City of the Dead until I find at least a pebble which I could put on the floor to break this horrible emptiness of the room. Also, I firmly promised myself I would search all buildings until I find at least one person who doesn't want to spend eternity sitting in an empty, grey room.

I sat on the floor, thinking about everything that happened, about everything I learned from Svantevid. Everything still seemed unreal to me and I knew it would take time for me to accept it.

I thought about my movies and games with regret again. My roommate was certainly enjoying himself with my collection right now, I thought. At the same moment, a scene appeared on the wall in front of me - my roommate, sitting with some of his mates, drinking and smoking

weed. I stared at the wall, grateful for having something that could replace TV.

I had stared for a while when I realized how much time had passed. The first grey hairs showed on my ex-roommate's head. I could go and search for another occupant of the City of the Dead, I thought again - but to be honest, I didn't feel like leaving the room. It was much more simple and interesting to stare at other people's lives.

I sat and stared at the wall until I completely forgot about my idea to find someone with whom I could hang around. I forgot about Svantevid too, I forgot how I had died and how I had lived - because it was much easier to simply follow other people's lives with an empty head, unburdened with any kind of thoughts.

I sat and stared - and the eternity lasted.



Robert Anson Heinlein

Be wary of strong drink. It can make you shoot at tax collectors... and miss...

Irena is a competent writer and one of the leading personalities of Croatian fandom today. Besides writing - she published a story collection Cabrón last year, she manages the leading Croatian SF portal: www.nosf.net

Irena Rašeta

LET IT BE GREEN

I knew where I'd been. Not where I was. My face was burning, eyes swollen and heavy, a well-known taste danced around my palate and made my tongue numb.

I was supposed to be at work at nine. But on the way the tram broke down, so I went out and walked into a coffee place right across from my red tram seat. Everything stopped. No one was going anywhere until they repaired the tram, and the Zagreb City Transport Authority was in no hurry. I was neither. My job sucked anyhow, and the coffee smelled too good to get upset over a couple of hours of being late.

The waitress looked at me askance, as if she knew what I was thinking about. Her fingers worked their magic over my coffee, the cup was steaming, I lit a cigarette. With a first sip, I glanced at her legs as she was walking away. She wore dense skin-colored nylons and white clogs. Higher up-a tight slit side mini skirt and a white shirt. Greasy hair tied up in a pony. She wasn't

particularly beautiful, but her body was spectacular. She moved like a ballet dancer and her eyes cut through as if she were Red Sonja. I gave up on comparisons and directed my thoughts back to the slit when suddenly she started coming back to my table.

"I forgot the water." Her voice was deep and pleasant. She bit her fingernails. I watched a drop of sweat fall down her cleavage.

"Thank you," I thought I was about to say, it was supposed to sound like that, but I heard "Marry me..." come out of my mouth.

There was no disco folk blaring from the speakers-which you might expect at this kind of a dive-but Dire Straits. I could've sworn I knew the song. *Waitress she watches me crossing from the Barocco Bar...*

She didn't reply, showed no surprise, she just put her hand in the big pocket of her apron and handed me a little green piece of paper across the table...

* * *

I felt my glasses pressing on my nose and the sweat dripping down my forehead. The smell of pot was strong and it mixed with the smell of beer someone had spilled on the floor so it was sticky. I was sitting on a barstool, one foot on the ground, other on the foot ring, with the guitar in my arms. I was strumming a tune everybody knew.

Our favorite band was on the repertoire once again: *Excuse me for talking I wanna marry you*. I couldn't tell if the audience enjoyed it or if they even cared. Voices, women laughing, glass breaking, everything mixed with the sweet and sour smell twisting from under my nose. I inhaled the smoke and kept my breath. Someone ripped the joint out of my mouth swearing because of the spit I passed on to him. Fuck it, I'm playing the guitar here, I thought.

We were rocking, that's how good we were, but perhaps it was just the pot. I remembered, it seemed as if the world revolved around us all. While I was still able to see, it was a familiar feeling I often got. Now, in the dark, I could only imagine the dizziness. My head was attached on a spring juggling on a dashboard of an SUV speeding through the desert... While my fingers picked the melodies they knew so well on their own, I felt someone else's fingers on my face. We wandered across the

desert, over the wheels, climbing on the hood, penetrating into the glass, piercing into my face.

They call it green, but as far as I'm concerned it could've been soylent of any color: red, yellow, even green, as long as it brought images back into my eyes-broken, shattered, blurry-and the taste of cinnamon under my tongue. Cinnamon teasing my nostrils... I greedily opened my mouth to the downy touch of the paper...

* * *

"Want some green?" her lips formed the question. She waved at me from across the room. It looked like she was dancing.

I smiled, looking at her hanging upside-down on a pole, and waved yes at her with my right foot. I went down to my knees and engulfed the pole with my sweaty breasts. The pole vibrated in the rhythm of the music that must have blared from the tall speakers around the podium. I couldn't hear the music, but that wasn't even necessary as long as I exposed my naked breasts to goggly eyes of drunks and impotent gangster wannabes. The DJ signaled that he was about to play the *Straits*. It was our favorite music in those slow, sticky nights when the sky was filled with clouds flashing with lightings unable to squeeze out at least one drop of rain. The nights full of sweaty circles on the shirts of boring bankers and software analysts who went bald

prematurely, the nights when whiskey was drunk, and bills stuck to fingers, when each of these so-called macho men wanted to grab something, ram into something, but he was either too frustrated or too desperate or too miserable, so he drunk himself into oblivion. *And a gogo dancing girl, yes I saw her...*

Suddenly she was behind me. Her hands moved over my body attracting all the eyes in the bar. Her hips set a slow rhythm on me. We moved as if we were one body, we knew how to dance this dance. We kissed and the audience was delirious-I watched as they applauded. Her tongue gave mine a little green note...

* * *

I turned up the radio to the sound of a familiar tune, and then continued cutting the carrot into thin circles. My fingernails were nicely manicured and painted pink. But the wrinkles were still winning over my fingers, you could tell that these were no longer hands of a young woman who swayed her hips and ruled the stage while *Dire Straits* blared from the speakers. I dropped the knife on the cutting board and wiped the fingers with my apron. For a moment I stood there staring at the stew simmering on the stove and waiting to be stirred. As my heart echoed in my chest, I ran to the mirror. I looked for them and kept finding them... the wrinkles around my eyes, my lips, skin

hanging from my face as if I were a bulldog... I felt disgusted with myself. Fucking old age, when did it come?

My hands were shaking as I felt my face. My blue eyes watched in horror an old woman's hair dyed too red. Skin of an old hag overly tanned. Teeth of an old cow who refused not to be young anymore, teeth that were too white and too perfect.

My body was still firm, but the details revealed more than they were hiding. Who else still wore such jeans? They'd come out of fashion a long time ago and they couldn't be worn even in the privacy of your own home. I hesitated to take them off, but when I did, with disgust I watched the balls of skin on my knees, veins crisscrossing my calves. I threw the jeans somewhere behind me all the while watching myself in my thong, which old women such as myself shouldn't be wearing at all. I felt sick with myself so I started screaming. I screamed from the top of my lungs while the smell of burning food spread from the kitchen.

Let it burn, let it all disappear... I ran searching for my purse and took a small white package from my wallet. With my fingers-and old, oh so old!-shivering, I opened a white cinnamon-scented handkerchief and brought a green piece of paper to my lips... Let it be green...

* * *

I started when the tram started. Everyone flew forward, and I hit my knee against the seat in front of me. I almost broke my teeth on the handrail, I thought, and swore something else instead. The tram stopped determinedly. My eyes were slowly clearing until I unconsciously felt the pocket of my shirt where I placed the empty wrapping of the green package.

It was a fucked up morning. I must have been riding the tram all night long, completely stoned. *Wild West End* by *the Straits* rang in my head, although I couldn't remember the last time I had listened to them. I was sweaty and I stank, but there was nothing I could do. I would have to go to work like that. It wouldn't be the first, besides my job sucked. I could do it with my eyes closed, with my left hand while I jerked off with the right and played Bach on a keyboard with my feet. Fucking prospects of promotion and fucked up team building that I refused to go to. So what if I got fired, let them find a better programmer.

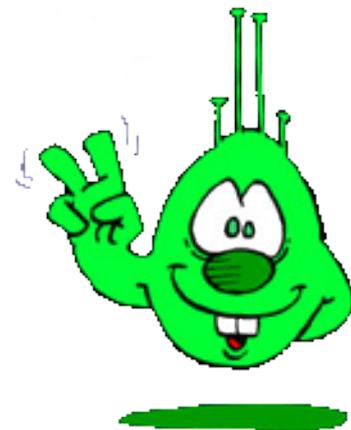
The tram stood still.

"This is gonna last," the driver said from his cab, provoking a wave of protest among the passengers. They started getting out into the street where the air was even stuffier than the one that contaminated the tram, and I wished another piece of paper.

Five minutes passed and I was already sick of reality, at least of my reality... I needed a rest, more of other people's thoughts, more of other smells and tastes, experiences of my fellow sufferers by the green, I just wanted to get far away from here. But, where can I get the green at this time of day and at this part of the town...? Where am I anyhow?

I looked outside at the street through the window and immediately on my right I saw a well-known pair of feet in clogs. I didn't know she worked at the dive, but I knew she always carried something on her. I smiled at my good fortune and unglued myself from the seat. Inside I ordered a cup of coffee and a glass of water...

(Translated by Tomislav Kuzmanović)



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 SF 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://scifantasyfiction.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>

UBIQ - THE NEW CROATIAN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Aleksandar Žiljak

Brief Course of History

The history of science fiction in Croatia was to a large extent defined by two long-running magazines. In order to understand their importance, we should first summarise the development of Croatian SF.

While elements of the so-called “proto-SF” can be traced as far back as the Renaissance, modern Croatian science fiction began shortly after World War I, when the first SF novels appeared.

Period immediately after World War II - when the war-winning Communist party led by Tito came to power - represented somewhat of a hiatus in the development of the Croatian SF. However, by the late 1950s, there was a considerable rise in translated novels published in Yugoslavia and Croatia. It didn't take long for some Croatian authors to try their hand in science fiction, and so we witness the first surge of novels, published between 1959 and 1965:

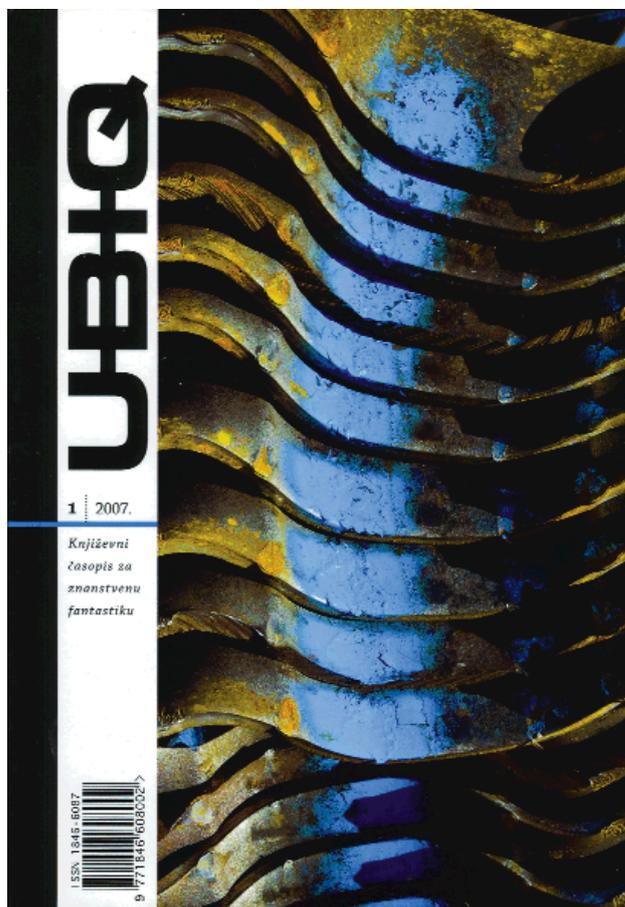
the best were those by Mladen Bjažić and Zvonimir Furinger (writing in tandem) and Angelo Rittig. Unfortunately, what looked as a very promising start faded into another hiatus lasting for a decade.

Early 1970s were a period of a renewed interest in science fiction. By 1976, time was ripe for the first Croatian SF magazine. It was the famous *Sirius*, modelled after contemporary American SF magazines, and publishing stories by prominent US, European and Soviet writers. However, *Sirius* - edited by Borivoj Jurković and later by Hrvoje Prčić - immediately opened its pages to Yugoslav and Croatian authors. This represented a quantum leap, because Croatian writers of all ages and literary styles (and skills) proved more than willing to participate. Each issue of *Sirius* brought at least one story by a Croatian author, and often more. *Sirius* also published some theory and an occasional writing course, as well as fandom

news, thus proving instrumental in finally creating what can be called a science fiction scene in Croatia and Yugoslavia. *Sirius* had a circulation of some 30 000 in its heyday and was elected twice (in 1980 and 1984) the best European SF magazine.

Unfortunately, the 1980s Yugoslavia was a country in a deep economic and political crisis. *Sirius* faced increased difficulties and was finally folded by its publisher in late 1989. This left a permanent scar in Croatian SF.

But, the thirteen years of *Sirius* resulted in science fiction becoming a firmly established, although occasionally derided, part of Croatian popular culture. The so-called “*Sirius* years” saw publication of some very important novels (particularly those by Predrag Raos), and the release of the only two Croatian SF movies:



The Rat Saviour by Krsto Papić and *Visitors from the Arkana Galaxy* by Dušan Vukotić. Fandom, too, became well-organised during the “*Sirius* years”, the most important club being SFera from Zagreb, founded in 1976 and still active. It publishes the fanzine

Parsek and organizes the annual SFeraKon convention held in Zagreb since early 1980s.

In early 1990s, the crisis in Yugoslavia culminated in its violent break-up. Croatia became independent, and almost immediately a new SF magazine was introduced to the readers. It was *Futura*, whose first issue appeared on news-stands in autumn 1992. *Futura* didn't differ much from *Sirius*, but it was published by a small publisher and faced an audience exhausted

by all the ravages of war, at that time still going on. Therefore, its circulation was much lower, and it had numerous problems, changing several editors and being sold to another publisher at the end of 1990s. However, *Futura* had similar importance to *Sirius*, albeit at the smaller scale: it provided place for Croatian SF writers to publish, which they did with similar enthusiasm as during the days of *Sirius*. New generation of writers

made its presence known at the pages of *Futura*. Unfortunately, *Futura* is at present *de facto* defunct. It became somewhat irregular during late 1990s, and was reduced to a single annual issue for the past several years, mostly bringing Hugo and Nebula

nominees and winners. Thus it lost almost any importance to Croatian SF.

In spring 1995, Zagreb club SFera published the first of its annual story collections, titled *Zagreb 2004*, conceived and edited by Darko Macan. These annual collections, running to the present day, proved even more important to the development of Croatian SF than *Futura*, because they were as a rule better-edited and opened to broader spectrum of themes and literary styles. Anyway, the 1990s saw the new surge in Croatian SF literature, with new writers writing better and better stories, followed by some quite good novels.

The most important lesson that can be learned from this very brief account of the history of science fiction in Croatia is the following one: If there is a magazine or a story-collection or a fanzine being published regularly, there will be writers ready to write stories for it. Magazines, fanzines and annual story-collections result in a large body of stories that eventually constitute science fiction as a literary genre. Also, they serve as a binding medium that glues together fandom and writers, thus establishing science fiction as part of popular culture. This lesson is particularly important in light of present crisis of SF magazines globally.

* On a panel quite unsuccessfully moderated by Boris Švel, editor of this stuff.

Per Aspera Ad Ubiq

As we have seen, aside from courageous pioneers, the rapid development of Croatian SF begun in 1976 with the appearance of *Sirius* magazine. By early 2000s, Croatian SF had quite a few well-established authors that produced considerable amount of stories and some very good novels.

In April 2004, during the SFeraKon convention held in Zagreb, Tomislav Šakić and Aleksandar Žiljak (the author of this text) came to an idea of putting together the anthology of the Croatian SF story.* The work on this anthology began almost immediately. Already having a very firm idea of the history of Croatian SF, they decided to limit themselves to the period since 1976. The anthology was scheduled for 2006, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of both *Sirius* and the SFera club.

The anthology was titled *Ad Astra - The Anthology of the Croatian Science Fiction Story 1976 - 2006*. It was published in April 2006 by a small Zagreb publisher Mentor. It is a mammoth 640-page hardcover volume, containing stories by the 40 most important Croatian SF writers in the past 30 years. It also contains a theoretical and historical introductions, as well as biographical notes for each of the featured authors and a reasonably complete bibliography of Croatian SF story in the

aforementioned period. *Ad Astra* proved quite a success, receiving very favourable reviews and stirring some media interest.

Carried by the success of *Ad Astra*, and realising the urgent need for a regular SF magazine, at that moment virtually non-existent, Šakić and Žiljak decided to start a new literary magazine for Croatian science fiction.

The initial idea was propositioned by Tomislav Šakić. He suggested not a monthly magazine such as *Sirius* or *Futura*, but a bi-

annual literary magazine with SF/F/H stories, theoretical texts, essays and bibliographical works. There are several literary magazines in the Croatian book-stores today, oriented towards main-stream literature, and they served as patterns during defining the concept. Žiljak, on the other hand, had previously published some stories in German *Nova* and *InterNova* and Italian *Futuro Europa*, and copies of these magazines, also bi-annual (at best), provided another model.

The title *Ubiq* was chosen partly to pay homage to Philip K. Dick (the original *Ubik* spelling was discarded due to copyright reasons), and partly to signify the

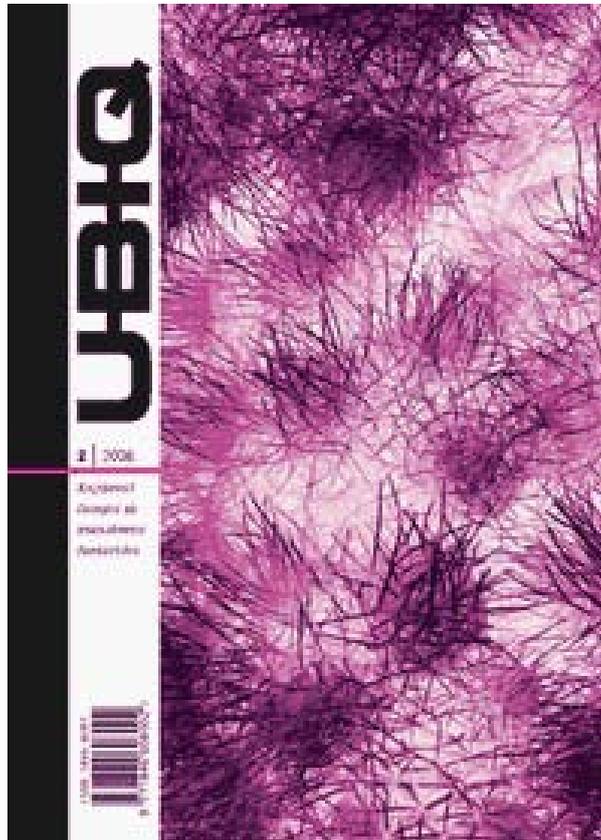
omnipresence - ubiquity - of science fiction in modern human society.

Ubiq - Literary Science Fiction Magazine is a 240-page magazine, published by Mentor and edited by Tomislav Šakić and Aleksandar Žiljak. Board of editors includes Igor Marković, Mihaela Marija Perković, Davor Šišović and Boris Švel, while the advisory board consists of Dr. Tomislav Brlek, Dr. Nikica Gilić, Dr. Zoran Kravar, Darko Macan, Zoran Roško and Dr. Darko Suvin. *Ubiq*

contains, on average, 10 stories by Croatian writers and 4 or 5 theoretical texts / essays / bibliographic works per issue.

Its quite radical cover design drew immediate attention (*Ubiq* was designed and laid out by Melina Mikulić and Studio grafičkih ideja - SGI), standing apart from what people usually expect of a SF magazine cover.

Issue 1 appeared in November 2007, and was introduced to the public on Interliber, the leading Croatian annual book-fair, held in Zagreb. Issue 2 was published in April 2008 to coincide with SFeraKon 2008, and issue 3 was published in November 2008. Issue 6 available since April 2009. *Ubiq* is a small-



press magazine, sold in book-shops, through Internet and on various SF conventions (Croatia currently has five conventions). Its current book-store price is 59 kunas (approx. 8 euros).

Ubiq is to a large extent state-sponsored. Since 2008, it is subsidized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, and since this year also by the City of Zagreb.

***Ubiq* So Far**

Six issues are enough to assess the initial impact of the project.

The whole idea was to provide a magazine that would publish Croatian SF writers. However, it takes two to tango. Luckily, *Ubiq* succeeded completely. Once again, as was the case with *Sirius*, *Futura* and SFera story collections, it was clearly demonstrated that the authors *will* write and publish if they have a *place* to publish in. Our contributors so far include veterans from the “*Sirius* days” (Lidija Beatović, Vesna Gorše, Biljana Mateljan, Veronika Santo, Branko Pihač), prominent writers from the 1990s (Milena Benini, Jasmina Blažić, Tatjana Jambrišak, Danilo Brozović, Darko Macan, Dalibor Perković, Zoran Vlahović, Aleksandar Žiljak), members of the new generation appearing with the 21st century (Tereza Rukober, Zoran Krušvar, Kristijan Novak), as well as newcomers to the scene (such as Katarina Brbora, Gordana

Kokanović-Krušelj, Nada Mihaljević, Sandra Obradović, Iva Šakić-Ristić, Manuela Zlatar). Editorial work in *Ubiq* is quite strict. As editors, Tomislav Šakić and Aleksandar Žiljak demand well-written stories with fresh ideas, and it apparently shows in the quality of the magazine. As it turned out, mere listing of names shows the prevalence of women writers, which is a trend that can be traced (in quality if not quantity) from as long ago as *Sirius*. As for sub-genres, the editors do not as yet discriminate between SF, fantasy and horror, but apparently SF remains dominant so far.

As for theory and essays, our most prominent contributor is, of course, Darko Suvin. But we also publish historical studies (for instance, by Biljana Oklopčić, Tomislav Šakić, Nikica Mihaljević, Bojan Jović and Boris Švel) and various essays (such as Milena Benini’s, comparing vampire and spy novels). We plan to publish texts on national SF scenes. So far, we had texts on Slovenian (by Tanja Cvitko), Chinese SF (by Lavie Tidhar), Serbian SF (by Miodrag Milovanović) and Spanish SF (by Julian Diaz) is ready for issue 4. Bibliographies were also published, the most interesting being a bibliography of Croatian SF up to 1945, prepared by Živko Prodanović.

Ubiq drew considerable attention from mainstream cultural scene. It received very favourable reviews in several culture magazines and some media exposure. It was also well received by the SF audience,

particularly in the face of the fact that it is oriented exclusively towards Croatian writers. Republic of Croatia and City of Zagreb support testify of good reception of the magazine and give some certainty of its continuous publication.

As we repeated several times, *Ubiq* is currently reserved for Croatian writers. Inclusion of authors from other countries (former Yugoslavia, Europe and the so-called Third world are the first that come to mind) would necessitate more pages, i.e. more issues per year. While we secretly hope to become a quarterly, we must be realistic and admit that it is very unlikely under current circumstances of a major global economic crisis. The only chance for the long-term success and survival of *Ubiq* is to go step by step, as allowed by available funds. Bi-annual national magazine is, apparently, quite a difficult proposition even in much richer European countries than Croatia. We have witnessed enough ambitious projects that lasted for an issue or two to be very, very careful in our plans. Since we are forced to remain bi-annual, and since our primary goal is to maintain the continuity and enhance the quality of Croatian SF writing,



we unfortunately lack space for any non-Croatian stories.

We *are*, however, interested in non-Croatian theory and essays. We published texts by authors from Slovenia, Serbia and Israel, USA and Spain so far. We'd like to see texts on various aspects of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, slipstream, and speculative fiction in general. We are also very interested in comprehensive histories of national SF scenes. The texts should preferably be in English. We must point out that *Ubiq* is currently a non-paying magazine. Queries are welcome and can be sent by e-mail on ubiq.tekstovi@gmail.com. You are also invited to visit our website (in Croatian) on <http://ubiq.nosf.net>

After the initial success, it is to be hoped that *Ubiq* will prove a long-running project, stimulating high-quality writing and thorough study of science fiction in Croatia. Our goal is to stress the position of SF not only as the element of popular culture, but also as a subject for serious academic work.

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.



