

Swarthmore College

Works

Russian Faculty Works

Russian

9-1-2005

An Interview With Davor Slamnig

D. Slamnig

Sibelan E.S. Forrester

Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

D. Slamnig and Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (2005). "An Interview With Davor Slamnig". *World Literature Today*. Volume 79, Issue 3/4. 54-55. DOI: 10.2307/40158937
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/7>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

An Interview with Davor Slamnig

Author(s): Davor Slamnig and Sibelan Forrester

Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 79, No. 3/4 (Sep. - Dec., 2005), pp. 54-55

Published by: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40158937>

Accessed: 04-01-2022 15:54 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>

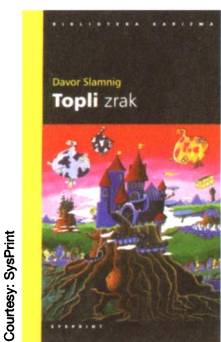


JSTOR

Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Literature Today*

An Interview with Davor Slamnig

SIBELAN FORRESTER



Courtesy: SysPrint

DAVOR SLAMNIG was born in 1956 in Zagreb, Croatia. For many years he played guitar in rock groups and performance projects that were widely featured on Yugoslav radio and television. Two collections of his short stories appeared in the 1980s. Since that time, as Slamnig comments, he has kept a low profile, and most of his writing has been in the invented computer language C++. Though he may be best known in Croatia as a musician and composer, in 2002 he published the novel *Topli zrak* (Hot air), which won a substantial prize from the newspaper *Jutarnji list*, as the best prose work of 2002. His story “Teletubbies” (“Teletabisi”) won a Ranko Marinović Prize in the 2004 *Večernji list* competition for best short story. He lives in Zagreb with his wife, Anka, and children, Viktor and Jana.

Sibelan Forrester The novel *Topli zrak* was your first book in many years—how long did it take to write, and what kept you working at it? Or was it a sudden inspiration?

Davor Slamnig It took me about fifteen years to write *Topli zrak*. I had never written a novel before, just short stories and a few plays. It started off easily enough: I had an extremely vague idea of what it would be about, and I began writing “from the top,” making things up as needed. Afterward, it became quite a burden, however. The years went by, I was writing an average of a page per month, it seemed that the pain would never end. It took me a while to realize that the book was finished.

The critics here in Croatia compared it to a lot of different things, from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*



Photo: Anka Novković Slamnig

to *The Lord of the Rings*, but I would not agree on either count. I’m pretty bored by Tolkien, but I like Douglas Adams, especially his earlier work. One review said that my book was Platonic, and another said that it was a “feminist amusement park.”

SF *Topli zrak* won that great prize from *Jutarnji list*—what did you do with the money?

DS The money (about eight thousand dollars) helped me adapt the attic of our house into a living space, which is where I work now. Finally, I have enough room to unpack my collection of vintage science-fiction paperbacks, stored in cardboard boxes since the 1980s.

SF Your father [Ivan Slamnig] was a prominent poet and university professor—how did his example influence your writing?

DS Well, there was a typewriter in the house, and I banged away on it at an early age. I realized, having a writer as a father, that writing was a valid profession. I read much of what he wrote, but he was primarily a poet, and I turned out to be a short-story writer. He wrote short stories, too, but I never managed to produce poetry. It seems that this particular gene was not passed on to me.

Both of us wrote only one novel (if I get masochistic enough, I might write another one). He wrote his because he got some advance money from a publisher, and I was driven by self-devised imperative—so it took me much longer. I feel my father had a great and precious influence on me, in writing and otherwise. And I may have influenced him a bit, too.

SF You've done your own partial translation of *Topli zrak* (on the Internet at www.slamnig.com)—how did you learn to speak and write English so well?

DS My father worked abroad a lot, so he took us to the United States with him on two occasions, in the early 1970s. I attended regular primary school there, picking up English pretty fast. Also, I experienced the contrast between the Indiana University primary school (with closed-circuit TV in those days) and a Chicago public school. I became interested in music, playing saxophone in the school band (led by Mr. Schubert), and I discovered pulp science fiction, *Star Trek*, Robert Crumb, the blues, TV commercials. . . . I was soaking up current Americana like a sponge. I grew my hair long and wore bellbottoms. It took me a while to integrate all this with Croatia when we got back.

SF The cover of *Topli zrak* reminds me of nothing so much as the psychedelic graphics of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, and the contents fit the cover pretty well. What's been the role of sex, drugs, and rock and roll in Croatian literature, especially in works of science fiction or fantasy?

DS I've been playing guitar in rock bands for about fifteen years, so I'm familiar with the milieu. Some of it probably crossed over into my writing, if you believe in that kind of thing. But I am not writing "rock-and-roll literature," God forbid. I can't say how much the aforementioned things have corrupted other Croatian writers, but we do have hard-boiled urban prose and people writing long fantasy novels here.

SF Who are your favorite authors?

DS I read mostly science fiction (and *Scientific American*). Since science fiction as a genre is almost dead now, I'm turning back to the vintage classics. I've been compulsively re-reading Philip K. Dick for the past couple of years. When I'm done with him, I'll probably take up Roger Zelazny or Kurt Vonnegut. But my personal favorite sci-fi writer, and author in general, is Robert Sheckley. *The Alchemical Marriage of Alistair Crowley* is the best book I've ever read.

SF How much of your reading (for pleasure) occurs in translation?

DS Well, for the most part, I read works written in English, untranslated. But I did a lot of English-to-Croatian

translating in my younger days, ranging from TV cartoons to Huxley's essays. And I've recently done a lot of work for Disney, translating movie songs for Croatian dubbing (I really had a hard time with *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*). So I'm aware of the basic problem of literary translation, which is to balance keeping the meaning of the text as literal as possible and not sounding strange. I read a lot of stuff translated from other languages into English. Sometimes the English translations of Slavic works sound really awkward (e.g., as in the case of Stanisław Lem, another of my favorite writers).

SF What's the role of foreign literatures in a "small" literature? Or do people really think about that? I remember the many "Russian, American and Yugoslav" jokes you used to hear, or jokes about the dollar, the deutschmark, and the dinar (the former Yugoslav currency), suggesting that a great deal of humor involved a self-deprecating sense of being distinct from the stereotypical First or Second World. Maybe it's different now?

DS Of course, if you are living in Croatia, you feel that you're not where the real action is. And there are only four million of us here speaking Croatian, so if you sell two thousand copies of a novel, it's a success. On the other hand, we do have an extensive literary history—we don't regard ourselves as "savages" in that respect. A lot of foreign titles are translated and published in Croatia; we are aware of the global situation (see *WLT* 78:2, May–August 2004, pp. 53–55).

SF What are you writing now?

DS I've just finished a short sci-fi-oid allegory about the paradox of having multiple monotheistic religions. I'm slowly compiling a short-story collection under the working title "The Potato Family" (Krumpirova rodbina). It will contain stories I've written over the last twenty years, a real mix of styles. I hope to have it finished by the end of the year. **WLT**

Zagreb

SIBELAN FORRESTER is Associate Professor of Russian at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. She has translated prose and poetry from Croatian, Russian, and Serbian, including the first part of *The Silk, the Shears and Marina, or About Biography*, by Irena Vrkljan (Northwestern University Press, 1999).