

MICHAEL BIGGINS RECEIVES  
PRESTIGIOUS TRUBAR AWARD

Each year, the National and University Library of Ljubljana (NUK) presents the prestigious Trubar Award to acknowledge high contributions to the protection and preservation of Slovenian cultural heritage. The Society is proud to announce that the 2020 award was made to the Society's current president, Dr. Michael Biggins. This is the first time that the Trubar Award has been made to a non-Slovene.

In its citation, NUK wrote that Biggins has "internalized Slovenian as his intimate or artistic language," and bestowed the Trubar Award on him for "exceptional merit and lifelong preservation, translation and promotion of Slovenian written cultural heritage at the highest level in the international arena." You can find the full statement (in Slovene) from NUK on its website, as well as an English translation on the website of the University of Washington's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

For those interested in learning more about Michael's work, we highly recommend turning to his January 2021 interview with RTV-Slovenija (available online) and the University of Washington Translation Studies Hub's recent in-depth video interview.

CONGRATULATIONS, MICHAEL!

SELECTED RECENT  
TRANSLATIONS OF  
SLOVENE LITERATURE  
FROM THE PAST DECADE  
BY MICHAEL BIGGINS:

- *Three Plays: Jakob Ruda, For the Good of the Nation, and Romantic Souls* by Ivan Cankar (forthcoming in 2021)
- *The Masochist* by Katja Perat (Istros Books, 2020)
- *Sea at Eclipse* by Mate Dolenc (Društvo slovenskih pisateljev, 2018)
- *Newcomers* by Lojze Kovačič (Archipelago Books, 2016-2024)
- *Games with Greta & Other Stories* by Suzana Tratnik (Dalkey Archive Press, 2016)
- *I Saw Her That Night* by Drago Jančar (Dalkey Archive Press, 2016)
- *The Tree With No Name* by Drago Jančar (Dalkey Archive Press, 2014)



- *The Errors of Young Tjaž* by Florjan Lipuš (Dalkey Archive Press, 2013)
- *The Master of Insomnia* by Boris A. Novak (Dalkey Archive Press, 2012)
- *Necropolis* by Boris Pahor (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011)
- *The Blue Tower* by Tomaž Šalamun (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011)
- *The Galley Slave* by Drago Jančar (Dalkey Archive Press, 2011)

REPORT FROM THE UK

BY OLIVIA HELLEWELL

**It's a pleasure to be writing my first contribution as Newsletter co-editor;** a role which I'm delighted to be sharing with Kristina. I thought I would begin by contributing a short update on Slovene-related events which have taken place here in the UK over the past six months. There have been quite a few, all of which have benefitted from wider participation thanks to their online format.

**Back in October 2020, I was invited by the British Centre for Literary Translation to launch my translation of Goran Vojnovič's third novel, *The Fig Tree*.** Goran was able to join us from Ljubljana, and along with publisher and editor at Istros Books, Susan Curtis, we spent an hour exploring some of the book's key themes, its complex characters, and of course, some of the many translation challenges. There were readings, and some great questions from audience members. Launching a book during the time of COVID is certainly a challenge, and I missed the buzz of being in a room with author and audience. But it did mean that many more people were able to tune in and listen, and I was heartened by the engagement both at this event, and at others, such as a book club meeting I was invited to. One of the more niche successes of lockdown here in the UK has been the 'Borderless Book Club': a translated fiction book club hosted by independent publisher Peirene Press, and it was great to see a work of contemporary Slovene fiction on the list, and to see the book being enjoyed by so many people who may not otherwise have encountered it.

**On December 8th, University College London's School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies welcomed Marta Verginella from the University of Ljubljana,** who delivered an engaging seminar entitled *From Slovenka to Ženski svet: Slovene Feminism in Trieste between Cosmopolitanism and the National Struggle, 1897-1928*, as part of the UCL SSEES Central Europe Seminar series. The presentation highlighted the rich variety of Slovene intellectual life in Trieste during the period, focusing on some of the "daring and pragmatic" women who contributed to the newspapers *Slovenka* and *Ženski svet*. For those who aren't familiar with Marta Verginella's work, her edited volume *Slovenka: prvi ženski časopis (1897-1902)* (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 2017) is the culmination of several years' research into the conditions, characters and contributions which led to the publication of *Slovenka* – the 'first women's newspaper' in the Slovene lands.

**Also at SSEES, back in February students of the Slovene language evening class were visited by the new Slovene Ambassador to the UK, Simona Leskovar.** The group, which is an advanced group of six students taught by Romana Sustar, had all prepared questions for the ambassador. They discussed their various reasons for learning Slovene, and the ambassador later reported how impressed she had been with their language skills. Classes are currently taking place on Zoom, which as Romana reported, does have its limitations, but it does mean that the group is now accessible to those outside of London; this year Romana has had students joining from Birmingham, Gloucester, and Slovenia. ■



THE SOCIETY  
for SLOVENE STUDIES

# LETTER

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President's Message... **BE WELL, BE ACTIVE, & STAY ENGAGED**

**It is my distinct pleasure** to open this newest issue of the Society's Letter by welcoming and thanking our two new co-editors, who are responsible for compiling the issue you're reading now. Kristina Reardon (PhD 2019, University of Connecticut), who also serves as the Society's secretary, and Olivia Hellewell (PhD 2019, University of Nottingham), both of them promising young scholars, Slovene-to-English literary translators of considerable accomplishment, and stalwarts of the Society already, have joined creative forces here to ensure that we have a diverse and engaging overview of significant events in the scholarly and creative lives of the Society's members as they relate to Slovene studies.

In this issue Kristina has interviewed Margaret Walker, a new member of the Society whose exploration of her own Slovene roots will take you by surprise, just as the ways she has begun to channel those new connections and discoveries into a remarkable creative outlet are likely to inspire you. You may have already read Kristina's review of Margaret's new book, *His Most Italian City*, set in Trieste under Italian Fascist rule, in the most recent issue of *Slovene Studies*.

In addition, as a new feature, we are including brief self-profiles from members of the Society who have responded to our call to share their Slovene-specific interests and the ways they have devised over the past extraordinary year and a half to stay in touch with the pulse of Slovene studies, to continue learning, discovering, and sharing their discoveries with those around them - and to lay groundwork for more intensive exploration and sharing, once we're all able to return to the field again, attending performances, visiting archives, conducting research and engaging with colleagues, students and friends unimpeded.

That shouldn't be long now. We'd welcome further profiles from any of you who would like to share them. In the meantime, speaking on behalf of all of us on the Executive Council: Be well, be active, and stay engaged with the phenomenal worlds of creativity and interest that Slovenia has to offer. ■

**Michael Biggins, President,**  
Society for Slovene Studies | Spring 2021



## — FROM OUR NEW NEWSLETTER CO-EDITORS —

We welcome you to this edition of the SSS Newsletter. In it, we hope you'll find engaging content that focuses on the recent accomplishments of members as well as ongoing literary, academic and other cultural events related to Slovenia.

We originally met at a SSS meeting at the annual ASEES convention in Chicago, and we also had the opportunity to participate in Michael Biggins' literary translation course taught virtually from the University of Washington when we were Ph.D. students. More recently, we've attended the 2020 JAK (Slovene Book Agency) translation seminar online together, and since we graduated and began to pursue translation from Slovenian and Slovene studies research in our full-fledged careers, we have found ourselves keeping in touch with each other. We've enjoyed conversations about translation and literature over the years that are difficult to have with other colleagues in our immediate vicinity who do not have the expertise or keen interest in Slovene or Slovene studies that the two of us have. We see the SSS as a space for scholars of all ages, specializing in all fields, to connect over shared interests, and we have benefited on both the professional and personal level from this scholarly space. It's our hope that the newsletter content that we curate will provide a similar space of connection for all readers and members.

In future issues of our newsletter, you can expect to find interviews with Society members and authors, features on Slovene studies programs that you may want to tap into, recent translations of major Slovene writing into English, as well as a range of other articles and announcements that pertain to your Slovene-related interests. While this issue focuses heavily on Slovenian literature, future issues may tend more toward Slovene music and musicology, Slovene art and art history, Slovene folklore and ethnography, Slovene language and linguistics studies, the history of Slovenia and the Slovene diaspora around the world, Slovenian current affairs or any number of other subjects that appeal to our diverse, international membership. If you have ideas for features, articles, or if there is a specific type of Slovene-related news you would like to see, please reach out to one or both of us. We would be delighted to receive your suggestions, ideas, and submissions. We can be reached at [kristina.reardon@gmail.com](mailto:kristina.reardon@gmail.com) and [o.f.hellewell@gmail.com](mailto:o.f.hellewell@gmail.com). ■

Olivia Hellewell  
University of Nottingham (UK)

Kristina Reardon  
College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, MA)

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO SSS FUNDS:

### Center fund

Archito P. Anzil  
Veronica Aplenc  
Darko Kajfez  
David E. and Roberta Kromm  
Warren Mazek  
Timothy Pogacar  
Marjeta von Rabenau  
Anthony Ravnik

### Endowment fund

David E. and Roberta Kromm  
Lydia Pulsipher  
Marjeta von Rabenau  
Anthony Ravnik  
Jernej Watson

### Lencek prize

Michael Biggins  
David E. and Roberta Kromm  
Darko Kajfez  
Jerry Lomshek  
Maya Margaronis  
Denis Sankovic  
Gojko Stare  
Marjeta von Rabenau

### Velikonja prize

Michael and Ivanka Antolin  
Michael Biggins  
Josef Figa  
Jerry Lomshek  
Maya Margaronis  
Marjeta von Rabenau  
Karl Ryavec

### Printing fund

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Michael Biggins  
Charles Debevec  
Darko Kajfez  
David E. and Roberta Kromm  
Ludmilla Lazar  
Thomas Mehle  
Raymond Miller  
Mary Ann Miosek Murphy  
Marjeta von Rabenau  
Susan Sachen

### New members

Kelli Buzzard  
Marko Drobnjak  
Teresa Melfi  
Militza Paiva  
Geoffrey Puckett  
Elizabeth Shiffrar  
Gary Good  
Alan La Pointe  
Theresa LeMaire  
Stephen Motika  
Caren McPherson  
Julie Romero  
Melissa Schnyder  
Borut Žunič

### Deceased members

Vladimir Rus

### Treasurer

Timothy Pogacar

## LITERATURE TRANSLATED TO ENGLISH IN 2020

At intervals, we will assemble lists of recently published Slovene literature in English translation for Society members and our other readers to pursue at their leisure. This list contains major work published in English translation in calendar year 2020. Readers may also consult the Slovenian Book Agency's database for literature published in English and other languages in 2020 and before.

- **The Big Circle** - Emilijan Čuček (Self-Published, 2020), trans. Emilijan Cucek.
- **Blackberry Heaven: A Novel in Stories** - Nataša Kramberger (Ljubljana: Litterae Slovenicae, 2020), trans. Kristina Reardon.
- **Felix After The Rain** - Dunja Jogan (London: Tiny Owl, 2020), trans. Olivia Hellewell.
- **The Fig Tree** - Goran Vojnovič (London: Istros Books, 2020), trans. Olivia Hellewell.
- **The Masochist** - Katja Perat (London: Istros Books, 2020), trans. Michael Biggins.
- **Newcomers: Book Two** - Lojze Kovačič (New York: Archipelago, 2020), trans. Michael Biggins.
- **Stan the Elephant** - Manica K. Musil (New York: Windmill Books, 2020), trans. Jason Blake.

If you or a scholar you know has recently translated work into English, please write [Kristina.reardon@gmail.com](mailto:Kristina.reardon@gmail.com) for inclusion on the next list.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**April 22. 3:30-4:30 pm EST.**

"Meet the Translator" with Michael Biggins speaking about *Newcomers, Books 1 and 2* by Lojze Kovačič, as part of a series sponsored by Folio, the literary program of the Seattle Athenaeum. Held online.

**June 15. 1-2:30 pm EST:**

*Slovene Literature as World Literature*, a talk by Michael Biggins held as part of the American Slovenian Education Foundation's (ASEF) Featured Speaker Series. Held online. Link TBA, see [www.asef.net](http://www.asef.net).

**October 2021:**

A conference on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Prof. Rado Lenček, co-founder of the Society for Slovene Studies and long-time professor of Slavic linguistics at Columbia University, sponsored by Slovenska matica, Ljubljana. Details TBA.

**November 18-21 & December 2-3:**

Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies annual national conference, New Orleans, LA (Nov 18-21) and online (Dec 2-3). Dates and times of the Society's annual business meeting and numerous Slovene studies-related panels and presentations to be published in June at [www.asees.org/convention](http://www.asees.org/convention) and in the Society's fall 2021 newsletter.

## SLOVENE STUDIES

# MEET OUR NEW MEMBERS

We welcome new members into the Society for Slovene Studies and invite them to email [kristina.reardon@gmail.com](mailto:kristina.reardon@gmail.com) with biographical information to be featured in a future newsletter! Here, we present the thumbnail biographies of four members who joined our ranks in 2020, with gratitude to these members for their generosity in sharing details about their Slovene connections, whether academic, familial, or otherwise.

## METKA TERSELICH

Terselich is a native of Bogota Colombia and currently lives in Dallas, where she runs Dallas Event Floral. Her grandparents, father, uncle and aunt emigrated from Slovenia to Colombia after WWII. She writes that her love for flowers and passion for nature were influenced by her *stara mama*, who grew her own dahlias on her high-rise balcony in Bogotá. She and her sister, Dunia, a noted pastry chef in Dallas, share a design studio where they work together to collaborate on many of the same events.

## THOMAS MCDONALD

McDonald is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at Stanford University researching modern German-language, South Slavic, and Japanese literature. His dissertation compares the work of Peter Handke with Japanese literature and film. He began studying Slovene in 2018, thanks to the support of Prof. Mia Rode and the American Slovenian Education Foundation (ASEF). Recently, he presented the Slovenian poetry of Fabjan Hafner at the Stanford Workshop in Poetics, which featured Prof. Michael Biggins as a special guest interlocutor.

## LUKE STRGAR

Strgar has Slovenian roots tracing back to his paternal grandparents, both of whom were Yugoslavian immigrants, originally to Canada, then the US. Luke currently resides in Portland, Oregon where he works as a software engineer and machine learning researcher. Following his most recent trip to Slovenia in August of 2019 Luke was inspired to join SSS, hoping to learn more about Slovenian history, culture, and language. In addition, Luke plans to enroll in an introductory Slovene language course starting in the Spring of 2020 and he hopes to make many future trips to visit family and swim in Lake Bled.

## KEITH BATISTA

Batista is a data scientist for the United States Air Force. He is currently working on a project that will discuss the economic and cultural impacts of Slovenia on the United States. It will discuss an extensive list of impacts from Slovenian owned businesses within the United States to the economic and cultural impacts that the Government of Slovenia has on the macroeconomic level.

## JAK TRANSLATION SEMINAR (REPORT)

The *Javna agencija za knjigo* (JAK, or Slovenian Book Agency) International Translation Seminar was one of many long-standing events faced with the task of adapting to an online setting during the pandemic. In December 2020, twenty-one translators of Slovene literature from seventeen countries took part in the International Translation Seminar from the comfort of their own homes around the world, and worked on sample translations for three distinct literary texts. In addition to the timetable of practical translation workshops, the usually lively, accompanying evening programme found a new home in a series of recorded interviews and readings with the authors in focus, for participants to enjoy (the links to these conversations are still available on the Association of Slovene Literary Translators Association YouTube channel).

The seminar, directed by Tanja Petrič, herself a prolific translator of German-language literature into Slovenian, included work for translation by children's writer and Modra



Ptica Award nominee Nataša Konc Lorenzutti, 2021 Prešeren Prize winner Feri Lainšček, and 2020 Kresnik Prize winner Veronika Simoniti. Among other topics, the seminar addressed the Covid crisis and its impact on translators and authors, and included discussion of the JAK-produced short film "Art in Crisis," also available on YouTube with English subtitles.

To close proceedings, participants enjoyed a surprise performance from Slovene folk rock musician Vlado Kreslin, and for those whom time zones allowed, a glass was raised in celebration of the hard work involved in converting such a social event to a new format on screen. ■



# PROGRAM REPORTS

The latest on Slovene Studies programs throughout North America. Don't see your program? Send us a note - we'd love to include info for Fall 2021.



## OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY SLOVENE RESEARCH INITIATIVE (OSU SRI)

### REPORT FROM EILEEN KUNKLER

This year's Slovene Research Initiative (SRI) Faculty Exchange has been postponed due to the pandemic, reports Eileen Kunkler, Assistant Director of the Office of International Affairs Center for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies at OSU.

Both OSU and the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) have decided not to run another call for applications until normal travel resumes and scholars selected for the 2019-20 exchange are able to resume and complete their awarded projects.

A special issue of *Acta Geographica Slovenica* was published that highlighted some of the research and team from a prior SRI exchange, however, and can be found at [slaviccenter.osu.edu](http://slaviccenter.osu.edu). ■



## THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS SLOVENE STUDIES

### REPORT FROM MARTA PIRNAT-GREENBERG

This spring, the University of Kansas has been offering an opportunity to gain basic Slovene language and cultural competency in a short course, Introduction to Slovene / SLAV 101. The course was designed to provide survival language skills for learners who plan to visit Slovenia for study, business, or pleasure, want to connect with their heritage or sample another interesting language and culture. Marta Pirnat-Greenberg writes that KU students who went on study abroad in Slovenia reported that learning some basic Slovene beforehand made their visit much more productive and enjoyable, with richer experiences and human connections.

The course is concise (15 hours in the span of 8 weeks, March 22-May 14), taught entirely online asynchronously, with (optional) live practice via Zoom, and open to non-KU students. Contact the instructor, Marta Pirnat-Greenberg at [mpg@ku.edu](mailto:mpg@ku.edu), for any further information about the course or for instructions how to enroll in possible future iterations. ■

## UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE REPORT FROM MICHAEL BIGGINS

In fall 2020 UW launched the latest cycle of our accelerated beginning-to-advanced Slovene language course sequence, encompassing three academic quarters per year over two academic years, by welcoming a new cohort of dedicated and energetic students learning the language faster than they probably ever dreamed they would. By the time the current cohort completes the course sequence in June 2022 they will be, like the students in the six UW cohorts that preceded them, more than prepared to venture independently and productively into the Slovene logosphere and cultural realm. Under pandemic conditions we have continued to conduct all of our classes and related social and cultural events online, with prospects of returning to our live classroom setting in fall 2021 (fingers crossed and thumbs held), with the new option that students living remotely will then be able to attend our Slovene classes online via Zoom.

On February 7, 2021 we held our eleventh annual Prešeren Day celebration in cooperation with greater Seattle's Slovenska miza community organization of Slovenes, Slovene Americans and friends of Slovenia. This year's program featured a variety of concise and entertaining presentations by UW students and community members, including:

- Recitations of Prešeren's "Zdravljica," two children's stories by Ana Štefan, and Andrej Rozman Roza's complete "Urška" (a modernized rewrite of Prešeren's classic, darkly humorous poem "Povodni mož"), all performed by three junior members of Slovenska miza ranging in ages from 5 to 17
- A presentation by UW Choral Music PhD alumnus Gerrit Scheppers about his experience collaborating with choral directors, musicians and choirs in Slovenia in December 2018, and his current efforts to establish a Slovene choral repertory in his new job as Director of Choral Studies at the University of Indianapolis, located outside of Pittsburgh, PA
- The dramatic reading premier of Act I, Scenes 1-4 of Ivan Cankar's drama Jakob Ruda in its first-ever English translation, to be published later this year.

- A slide lecture by local art historian Nives Meštrovič of Seattle's Frye Art Museum, titled "Elsa Oeltjen-Kasimir and Luigi Kasimir, Artists from Ptuj," occasioned by Nives's recent discovery of a previously unidentified rare print by Elsa Oeltjen in the Frye's collection.

- A presentation titled "The Disappearance and (Partial) Reappearance of a Slovene Folkway: Name Day Celebrations = Godovanje," by recent UW M.A. alumna Hannah Standley, based on research she did for her M.A. thesis.

... all of which transpired in less than sixty minutes!

The UW-University of Ljubljana Scholars Exchange has, by mutual agreement of the two universities, remained in hiatus for all of 2020 and well into 2021, but our hope is that UW's two faculty members (one from glass arts/ceramics, the other from ethnomusicology) and one PhD student in history selected to participate in January 2020 will be able to realize their research collaborations with faculty and students on the ground in Ljubljana by fall 2021.

Likewise, the new UW-University of Ljubljana student exchange agreement already signed onto by ten colleges and schools of the University of Ljubljana was put on hold with the pandemic, almost at the instant of its planned launch in spring 2020; but we look forward to welcoming up to twelve undergraduate and graduate students from Ljubljana per year and sending twelve of UW's, all of them representing a wide range of departments and majors and even further interlinking our two institutions and cities, as soon as circumstances permit. *Držite nam palec!*

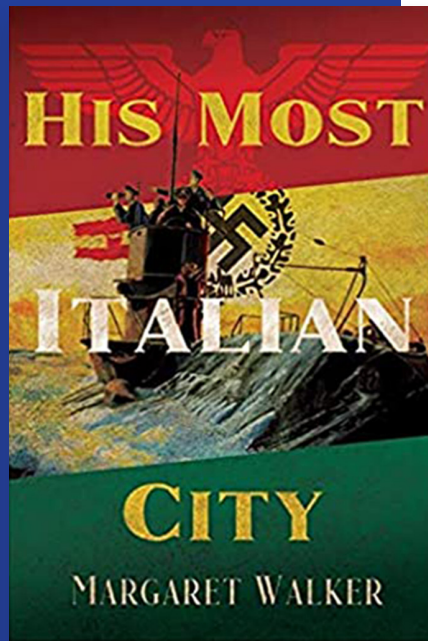
As I write this, the Japanese cherry trees on the UW campus's central academic quadrangle, donated to UW in 1935 by the Consul General of Japan based in Seattle, are in full, glorious perennial bloom, with not enough people present to enjoy them. ■



# A conversation with Slovene-Australian author MARGARET WALKER

WITH KRISTINA REARDON

In 2019, Margaret Walker’s debut novel *His Most Italian City* was published with Penmore Press in Tucson, AZ. The novel, set in 1928, features Slovene protagonists moving between present-day Italy and Slovenia as they negotiate Slovene identity in the context of the interwar years... all while main character Matteo Brazzi seeks to find the man who bombed his office in Trieste. The novel is reviewed in full in *Slovene Studies* (volume 42, number 2, pages 207-210).



**Kristina Reardon (KR):** Your novel begins with a bang—quite literally! I was drawn in from page one. As an author, what drew you to begin your novel with such a dramatic start?

**Margaret Walker (MW):** As a judge of the Bath Novel Award once famously said, there are other ways to begin a thriller than with a dead body. I was adopted, and *His Most Italian City* was conceived in order to record my birth mother’s memories of growing up in the Istria of Mussolini. Silvana was born in Tar and her father in Trieste, places of which I had never heard until I met her. Firstly, then, I considered that my role as an author must be to educate my readers and, like all tired teachers on a Friday afternoon, to keep the attention of your class you have to make it fun - add love, revenge, submarines, and a big bang at the beginning!

**KR:** Tell us more about your process of researching Slovenia and its political and historical landscapes. Have other authors inspired you?

**MW:** The first book I read to discover my origins was *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* by Jan Morris. Some years later, I learned about Boris Pahor, and ordered a copy of *Piazza Oberdan* in German. I’m not a linguist - my German is self-taught and shaky - but I was determined not to let this deter me.

The differences between the two books about the same city could not have been starker. Much as I admire Jan Morris, the very real traumas of twentieth century Trieste seem overtaken by Morris’s need to appropriate the city as part of her personal journey. Her whimsical style reduces the agony described in *Piazza Oberdan* to the notes of an absorbed but itinerant observer. Because it never gets deeper than what is meaningful to Morris, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* can’t offer a solution to the scourge of nationalism that has plagued Trieste, yet it’s the only book most English speakers will ever read about it.

Boris Pahor, on the other hand, fascinates me. His extraordinary life is a book in itself, and deserves to be better known. I am saddened that Westerners know him only as the author of *Necropolis*, his personal experience of the Holocaust. We are all, at times, guilty of reducing our

awareness of World War II to the Holocaust, and no doubt this is why I found *Necropolis* in a small suburban library in Sydney.

I am in awe of Pahor’s endurance. Despite the bigotry and violence he lived with that would have made most of us pack up and leave, he stood fast in order that the thousand year Slovenian presence in Trieste might remain and be acknowledged. At 107 he still seems, from the articles I have read about him, to be alert and cheerful. Two years ago, I wrote him a letter of thanks for *Necropolis* and *Piazza Oberdan* – in Italian so that my bilingual husband could tidy it up for me. The Slovenian Book Agency in Ljubljana had given me Mr. Pahor’s address and, when I informed them that I had sent the letter they said, ‘I hope he replied.’ Shortly afterwards, I posted a copy of the novel to the Slovenian embassy in Canberra. I did assure them that, if they should ever see him, please tell him that, at 105, he needn’t feel that a reply was necessary! Last year, when the Narodni Dom [i.e., the Slovene National Hall in downtown Trieste, built in 1904 but burned down by Italian Fascist arsonists in 1920 - KR] was handed back to Trieste’s Slovenian community, I felt quite a wonderful sense of resolution for him.

## We are all, at times, guilty of reducing our awareness of World War II to the Holocaust ...

**KR:** The plot of your novel is wonderfully complex. There are characters in Italy and Slovenia, you draw on the history of both countries and the region as a whole, and characters’ political affiliations clash in moments of dramatic tension--and sometimes humor. How did you keep track of it all as you were writing, and were there any challenges in research that you encountered as you worked on the finer details of your characters and plot?

**MW:** I have always been a political animal and, while researching the novel, I was intrigued and horrified by the abuses of Fascist Italy. The fact that these remain largely unknown today only added to my determination to record them. *His Most Italian City* has been accused of being anti-Italian, but it was Italian ultranationalism that led to the persecution of the quarter of Trieste’s population who were Slovenian. Nothing appears fully formed on history’s stage. The roots of the movement that changed Trieste from the multicultural port we can see in old birth records to the violent forefront of fascism that Pahor describes began way back in the Italian Risorgimento of the mid-19th century.

## I have always been a political animal and, while researching the novel, I was intrigued and horrified by the abuses of Fascist Italy.

Neither the League of Nations nor the Allies, following World War II, prosecuted Fascist Italy for its crimes against Slovenia and numerous other countries. In company with other Australian and British soldiers, my father-in-law fought with the communist-led Italian Partisans, and was present while Britain and the USA were recreating post war Italy into a stable Western bloc against communism. It seemed to our family that the non-Western victims of Italy’s Fascist history were of secondary importance to the Allies’ most pressing fear, that Stalin would walk in.

I sent a copy of *His Most Italian City* to Alessandra Kersevan, a historian based in Udine/Videm (Italy), whose desire that the crimes of Fascist Italy should be more widely known has attracted a hate campaign against her. A great deal of dangerous nonsense is still perpetrated by the Italian far right in order to confuse the historical memory. My new novel *Through Forests and Mountains* (Penmore Press, 2021) is about the Yugoslav Partisans, but its sequel *Shadower* concerns the brutal Italian occupation of Dalmatia. Bookshelves overflow with newly published works about Nazi Germany yet it is hard to find one about Fascist Italy. *The Force of Destiny* and *Fascist Voices* by Christopher Duggan are both excellent, and we recently watched the 1981 film about Italian war crimes in Libya, *Lion of the Desert*, sponsored by Colonel Gaddafi and banned by the Italian government.

**KR:** After reading your novel, and your endnotes, it appears that your fascination with Slovenia and your Slovenian roots fueled at least the setting (as well as the characterization and plot) of your novel. Can you tell us more about what made you want to pursue the specific moment in history, and these characters, after learning your own family’s history? What was it about 1928 that felt so compelling?

**MW:** 1928, the year the novel is set, came about by circumstance. Silvana was born Maria Silvana Micatovich Tonon in 1920. On November 29, 1928 Mussolini’s government changed her surname Micatovich to Di Micheli. The Slovenian anti-fascist group TIGR was formed in 1927, so it was not unreasonable for the character of Stefan Pirjevec to get involved with them on the pretext that his nemesis, Matteo Brazzi, had betrayed his country. TIGR, as well, provided the path for Stefan’s brooding revenge against Brazzi for the intimations of adultery that had tarnished the memory of Stefan’s wife and prevented his expression of grief at her death. Weaving history into plots is a great pleasure for me and, if I get stuck, I admonish myself to be patient - walk the dog, go to work, clean the gutters - like all problems, the minute one is distracted, the solution presents itself.

Silvana’s maternal grandmother came from a Slovenian village ‘near the border with Austria’. Her name was Maria Matjasic or Matjašič (Latin: Matiasich). Silvana remembered her as ‘little and thin, went to church a lot and said her prayers at each hour of the day followed by the lines: ‘If life is a story, then look at the time I am losing.’ Maria was born in about 1857 into a family of five children, and ran away from home aged 16 to escape a drunken father. She was taken in by nuns, trained to be a teacher and eventually sent to Tar in Istria no later than

1884. In those days, the only way to get to Tar was from Trieste by boat via Novigrad, and my 1915 atlas shows me that there was a railway line to Trieste that passed through Slovenia. This suggests that Maria came from either the west or northwest of the country. Unfortunately, endless searches have failed to uncover a marriage certificate that might pinpoint the exact location. She remained in Tar until 1948, when her husband died and she left to be cared for by relatives.

**KR:** As I read the novel, I was as engaged by its energetic plot as by the humor you were able to imbue in small details, like the conversation between the two older Austrian women in the first third of the novel that pokes fun at Brazzi’s character. I’ve heard it said in creative writing workshops I’ve attended that inserting a range of emotions, from humor to sadness to happiness to fear, is as important as attending to the softness and loudness of dynamics in a piece of music-that small bits of humor can ironically heighten other serious moments, and vice versa. Can you tell me more about your work on tone in this novel, and how you shifted between small moments of humor and greater moments of narrative tension and drama?

**MW:** A few years ago, I completed a post graduate diploma in Professional Communication. There were a number of writing and editing units, and one exercise I found particularly helpful was writing without pause for fifteen minutes. If you know your setting and characters very well, this allows a more conversational style to develop into which humour flows naturally. When I was younger, I agonized over my choice of style. I thought it would be best to study the style of famous Australian writers, and to a certain extent I did. Now I realize that it is more important to engage with your audience, and humour is a great way of doing this. To describe my method of executing narrative tension and drama is to stumble towards an explanation that may outline my metaphysical nature – or may not. How shall I put it? When approaching important moments in the text, I must turn off my rational sense and cloak myself in what amounts to a veil in order to reach the torment of the character. You have to connect with an internal life for the time you are writing, later on you can go back and edit what you’ve written, as necessary. It requires practice and empathy. It is not philosophy, in the way that philosophers use argument to prove a point. It is not psychology. It is an acknowledgment that a character is body and mind, then attempting to locate that third part, which is the spirit.

**KR:** Tell us more about your connection to Slovenia. Do you plan to write other short stories or novels about Slovenia in the future?

**MW:** In 2002, I had an Adoption Reunion, and the greatest delight in writing the novel in 2017 was to bring to life my deceased family members using the living as a guide – and myself, of course! These included Silvana herself, my imperturbably fashionable grandmother who didn’t care if the world was coming to an end as long as she looked good, and my clever grandfather who languished in her shadow. Then there was my great grandfather, who was considered ‘not very bright’ by Silvana merely because the only job she ever saw him do was looking after the property he had inherited, and lastly her beloved uncle whose academic career was strangled by Italian nationalism. And what could be the significance of that post-prayer speech of my Slovenian great grandmother that caused Silvana to remember it so accurately? Having a biological family is a wonderful thing!

Silvana told me of the legend that the family surname Micatovich came from an island down the south coast of Dalmatia and meant ‘son of Michael.’ After thirty years of research, I believe that this was St Michael’s Island in the Bay of Kotor, known today as the Island of Flowers. On it once stood an Orthodox Monastery dedicated to St Michael the Archangel or, in the Greek iconography of the Orthodox Church, MIXAEL TAXIARHIS, Michael the Brigadier who, in the Bible, NT, Revelations 12, went to war against the devil. Thus, we have, MIXA-Tovich = Micatovich, Son of Michael the brigadier.

This is an extraordinary example of oral history, and it echoes the philosophy of the novel, that we should listen to each other and record our stories. The sense of identity it gives me is beyond price. ■