

In the Hold

U potpalublju: sapunska opera

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Vladimir Arsenijević is a novelist whose debut, *In the Hold*, won the prestigious NIN Award for Best Novel. It is among the first novels to address the lives and everyday reality of Belgrade's citizens at the onset of the wars that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Due to his engagement and writing about the war, its consequences for society and the individual, and his highlighting of the responsibility of the state and society in which he lived, Arsenijević was forced to spend several years in exile.

The novel *In the Hold* is divided into three parts, following the lives of a young Belgrade couple over three months in 1991: October, November, and December. At the outset, the narrator describes the situation he and his wife, Anđela, are in. They are a couple in their late twenties who, after a turbulent youth often marked by drug use, now face a moment when they must finally grow up, as their country descends into war and the madness of conflict begins to spill onto the streets of the capital. Anđela is in an advanced stage of pregnancy, and the child to be born represents a pledge of a possible future for the characters, as well as for the society they inhabit.

Soon after the protagonists are introduced, the plot is set in motion by a draft notice received by Anđela's younger brother, Lazar, a member of the Hare Krishna movement who struggles to cope with the modern world and whose only constant in life is visiting the young couple once a week. Unexpectedly, Lazar decides to respond to the draft, more out of passivity and an inability to find meaning in everyday life than from conviction or a desire to participate in the war. His parents also accept his departure to the front fatalistically, as the lesser of the possible evils that might befall him if he ignored the call, which leads to heated arguments with Anđela, who is uncompromisingly anti-war.

As the novel progresses, Lazar's death in the war in Slavonia reveals the destructiveness of the times and the madness of war that has struck the family. It also prompts the protagonist to recall and count all the friends and acquaintances who have lost their lives or been forced to flee because of the war. After bearing witness to the devastation of society and an entire generation, the novel nevertheless points towards the possibility of a future through the motif of awakening from sleep, thoughts of the child soon to be born, and the laughter of the two future parents.

In the Hold, the destruction of society and a generation is explored not through explicit depictions of war, but through its consequences in the background – specifically, in the capital of one of the warring sides. The choice of the intimate, incomplete diary form is therefore deliberate. The text

does not provide exact dates for individual entries, apart from dividing the novel into three named months of the year, which highlights the absence of events that suffocates existence in a war-stricken environment with meaninglessness. Similarly, the protagonist, who narrates in the first person – is also stifled, giving his statements a confessional tone, yet without a pronounced personal dimension. Instead, he records a bare existence in which he finds no meaning.

The community, always a political community, appears in his statements as a place of indecision and hesitation. When speaking about it, the narrator constantly shifts between the first person singular and plural: “I felt sorry for all of us. In a flash of sudden and all-encompassing vision, which tore apart the usual boulevard scene before my eyes, I saw us all fleeing, while the ground beneath our feet, with a terrifying screech, cracked and opened, and from those depths spread the unbearable stench of centuries that we, in our inertia, failed to use in a dignified way...” In this way, the narrator continually finds himself on the boundary between self and other, raising a legitimate question within his statements, whom does he represent: himself or the community? It seems he knows both quite well, and relates to them without pathos, critically, constantly questioning his own place within the community. This position is suggested by the novel's title, in the hold, and is equally ambivalent: it both protects the individual from destruction and brings him closer to the abyss of wartime madness. Ultimately, only the literary text is a space in which such ambivalence can be represented and appear in its most tangible form.

LANGUAGE: Serbian/Српски/Srpski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: