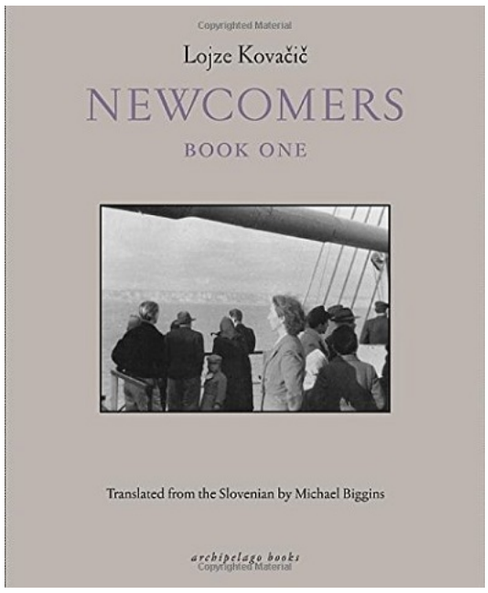
Newcomers: Book One by Lojze Kovačič

Reviewed by Erik Noonan

Published: January 31, 2017



Published by Archipelago Books, 2016 | 356 pages

Halfway through *Newcomers: Book One* – Lojze Kovačič's novel-cum-memoir about his adolescence in Slovenia during the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War – Bubi (alias Alojz Samson), our protagonist, glimpses his reflection in a jewelry store window. As he steps up to the glass, his gaze zooms in to focus on signs of hopelessness and confusion in the shadows of his eyes and nose. "All the rest," he laments, "was some unknown brat, whoever he was, who could very easily also have been my enemy, but under no circumstances my close friend ... more likely an obstacle, the way other boys I tried to avoid were obstacles to me..." Bubi leaves off from his meditation in the mirror and gets on with life, but not before concluding: "I was one of those kids I had to run from because they were constantly blocking my path ..." Set in the Slovenia of Bubi's childhood, yet told through a narrative saturated with the spiritual exile of Kovačič's adult years, *Newcomers: Book One* bears stark witness to both the immediate and lasting effects of immense trauma on an individual and a country.

Born in 1928 to a German mother, Lojze Kovačič lived in Basel, Switzerland, until the age of ten, when the Swiss authorities relocated the family to Yugoslavia because his Slovene father, a prosperous furrier, had not applied for citizenship. The family lived in the countryside first, then in Ljubljana, where Kovačič learned Slovene, speaking with the accent that would draw anti-German sentiment throughout his life. He'd written his first stories by 1942. Charged with the attempted sale of a sewing machine that had been declared state property upon his father's death, and threatened with deportation at a

Review: The Hermit by Lucy Ives

Lit & Luz 2017 Mexico City

time when his mother and sister languished in a refugee camp, Kovačič managed to remain in Yugoslavia through the intercession of a literary critic who admired his writing. In his adult years Kovačič achieved renown equally for his novels and his children's books, and he continued to write until his death in 2004. Kovačič's creative period thus commences during World War Two, and continues throughout the second half of the century, a period which endured the Cold War, witnessed the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and began drawing to a close with the 1991 advent of Slovenian independence.

The *Newcomers* trilogy originally appeared in 1984-85, at a moment when Yugoslavia's dictator Josip Broz Tito had already died, but when the constituent parts of the crumbling Eastern Bloc country had not yet coalesced into the sovereign nation-states of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. The events of *Newcomers* – told from the first-person perspective of "a nervous, volatile boy," the son of a Swiss German mother and a Slovenian Yugoslav father – commence in the year 1938, when the Samson family arrives in Slovenia, and conclude in 1948, when Kovačič joined the Slovene army. The story, in large part Kovačič's own, relates the forced repatriation of a struggling petit bourgeois family of furriers, from Basel to Ljubljana, in the months leading up to the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland. Archipelago's edition of *Book One*, the initial installment of Kovačič's three-volume work of autobiographical fiction, translated from the Slovene by Michael Biggins, is the first substantial English translation of this author's work, a significant event considering Kovačič's's status as one of the most highly regarded Slovene writers of the twentieth century.

Kovačič employs two main stylistic features in *Newcomers* to summon the spirit of his childhood self. The first of these is a fragmentary and reflexive stream-of-consciousness narration. The reader becomes a third-party witness to the author's dialogue with himself, in his nostalgia for the bygone wholeness of childhood, amidst the darkness and glimmer of present-day life: "He knew Greek and Latin... Knowing several languages meant you could change the world, your surroundings even more ... the woods by the train tracks ... could become an ancient forest with pagan gods and bulls that knew how to speak ..." The fragmentation and stream of consciousness narration of the text document the formation of the narrator's sensibility.

The second salient stylistic feature of *Newcomers* is the Low German dialect – the tongue of Bubi's mother – in which Kovačič has written the family conversations. Translations appear in footnotes in the English text, as in the original Slovene. In its return to the language of Kovačič's childhood, *Book One* transports us back to a vanished time before the Wehrmacht invaded Yugoslavia, casting Bubi's childhood into stark relief, an effect compounded in the light of the historical fact that some four decades later, in the years when the trilogy was being written, Slovenia stood on the verge of self-determination, soon to gain a new national identity. At one point Bubi's classmates ignorantly conflate his native German tongue with pro-Nazi sentiment and taunt him mercilessly: "'Zurick in die Schweiz! Heilhitler! Heilhitler' they hollered ..." In its bilingualism and in the complexity of its narration, *Book One* possesses a rough mystique. The untranslated Low German dialect of the quoted speech, accompanied by footnoted translations, compounds the effects of the stream of consciousness narrative, interposing a distance between the reader and the text which doubles that between the protagonist and his world. As readers, we witness first hand Kovačič's struggles with physical and spiritual exile.

Literary works reflect the spirit of the age in which they are written, and the text of *Newcomers*, the story of a boy coming into consciousness during a propagandistic time, is no exception. *Book One* displays its artifice everywhere, but it does so in such a way as to omit any sense of illusion or spectacle. Too mannered to pass as realism, its style simultaneously lacks the effete and awkward self-consciousness that is so prevalent in the postmodern novels of the period in which it was written. As autobiography, *Newcomers* is extraordinary in its eschewal of summary and narrative explication; as fiction, it is extraordinary in its forgoing of figures of speech. Kovačič builds up a gritty naturalism, directing our attention to a single criterion of truth: the bearing of witness to the cataclysms of history, and the trauma of their aftermath. For Kovačič, the incommunicable and the incomplete are the writer's domain.

Erik Noonan is from Los Angeles. He attended Hampshire College, Utrecht University, and New College of California. He is the author of the poetry collections *Stances* and *Haiku d'Etat*, as well as numerous articles on literature, film, and art. He lives in San Francisco with his family.