

**Interview Writer in Residence Lina Simutyté door Uschi Cop op festival Nieuwe Tijd
29 oktober 2022**

Voiceover 1: *Dit is een podcast van Wintertuin.*

Voiceover 2: *Elk jaar biedt Wintertuin een internationale opkomende schrijver een residentie in Nijmegen. Met als doel deze startende literaire maker te vertalen en te verbinden aan Wintertuins nationale netwerk. Dit jaar nodigden we, in samenwerking met het Litouws Cultureel Instituut, schrijver Lina Simutyté uit. Je gaat nu luisteren naar het gesprek dat Wintertuinmaker Uschi Cop met Lina had tijdens het festival Nieuwe Tijd op zaterdag 29 oktober 2022. Daarnaast hoor je voordrachten van Lina in het Litouws en [andere, vertaalde fragmenten] door vertaler Anita van der Molen.*

Uschi: Good evening everyone. I think some have already introduced us but I'm going to do it again. I'm Uschi, and I'm very happy and honoured that Wintertuin has asked me to interview Lina Simutyté, the Writer-in-Residence at Wintertuin this month. She's only arrived a few days ago from Lithuania, so I think we should really give her a warm welcome in Nijmegen, so an applause, to celebrate her coming here.

[applaus]

Lina: Thank you.

Uschi: Lina studied cinema dramaturgy at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theater and she began publishing short stories in literary and cultural magazines in 2013. In 2020, she made her debut with a book of short stories. You can see the book here – *Miesto šventė* – and the translation is 'town festival'. The book won the Jurga Ivanauskaitė prize for free, open and bold creative expression, and Lina also won the Young Artist Award of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania. So wow! What a way to enter the literary world, winning prizes. What was that like? How was your debut experience?

Lina: First I'd like to say a big thanks, I'm really happy to be here, and it's amazing to know that your book brought you to different countries even. So yeah, when I remember this debut book, I remember one thing that I just wanted to publish it finally. I had no expectations, of course I had a dream that some people would read it, maybe message me or something, but I couldn't dream about something big. For me, just to publish it and just to have it finally – and when it started with prizes and everything, of course I was very happy. I felt really amazing. It was so important to me. But actually, all these prizes brings you anxiety because you start to think that–

Uschi: Like a pressure?

Lina: Yeah – you have to be the same, you cannot let yourself just fall asleep or just to enjoy life. You have to make it everyday – you have to write, write, write, and I'm not that kind of writer.

Uschi: You need to live while you write – I understand that. Well – write, write, write – you're here at a writer's residency. What do you expect to find here? Are you going to write a lot?

Lina: I think that I would love to write a lot, but also – because I just arrived, and it's like my fourth day, I love just to go around to see how it is here, how different we are – or how similar we are. I'm going to work on my second book here.

Uschi: We will talk about that some more later, but maybe first, let's go to this book right here. Your first published work. So it's a book of short stories, there are 13 short stories, with all their separate narratives, separate perspectives, but it's all circled around a common theme. You told me some things already, but maybe you can tell the people here what it is about? What is the common thread?

Lina: Yeah, the title '*town festival*' came from most all of the short stories, because in each story it has something like festive, or partying, or getting drunk as hell, celebrating Christmas, having not very fun evenings with your family... So yeah, I was thinking about the theme which can be in many of them, so that's why it's in the title.

Uschi: And also your characters, they have these similarities. You told me – I thought it was so beautiful – you said your stories are about 'underground people, young people living small lives, dark lives'. So does that mean anything to you personally? Does this relate to who you are as a person? Why does that interest you, those small, sometimes rural, sometimes secluded lives?

Lina: Yeah, because I came from a really small town. It wasn't like the countryside, but it was a really small town. I heard a lot of stories from my friends, and from my classmates. For me, it would be just a pity that nobody would tell these stories.

Uschi: It's like the forgotten, hidden stories in the small towns–

Lina: Yeah! Because some stories in this book are not happening in a small town – one story is abroad, outside Lithuania, it's in Canada – but I think all these 'small lives' are around us. It's connecting us somehow.

Uschi: You wrote somewhere: 'I like small towns the most.' So you're here in Nijmegen, and I think we can say this is a small-ish town.

Lina: It's medium!

Uschi: It's medium, well, we can see the charm of the small town sometimes here. And then you say: 'However I couldn't stand being in remote places for long. It doesn't take long for me to

miss the big, loud city.' I understand you live in Vilnius right now – is that the reason? How do you relate your writing practice to living in such a busy city?

Lina: Actually, I'm always trying to escape big cities. I'm living in Vilnius, but I'm trying to escape it like to go where my parents – they live near the forest in another part of Lithuania. I'm always looking for residencies for some places where I can just write, just lock myself in and just write. But it never happened, because even when I'm thinking about these authors living in old times, where they were writing novel after novel without internet, without Skype, or Messenger or anything else, I guess their wish was also to communicate with the world. That's why I write, and I think that most writers have this idea that you want to connect first.

Uschi: Yes, we will get back to that thought later. First, I want to dive into some stories. Of course, I don't read Lithuanian – I'm sorry. But there are some stories of Lina that are available in English and you all should really read them, because they are amazing. I think the cover already says a lot of the book. You see a person sitting in a glass cage that is filling up with water, and the person is on fire. So it's a very interesting image, and Lina's prose is also filled with very interesting images, but also contradictions, maybe a bit to the absurdity. And this really translates into the work, so they're very interesting stories to read.

So I read the story, *Water is a Hypocrite*, which is also in the book. It's written from the perspective of a young man in Vancouver, and you can really feel the clash of two worlds. Like in the new world, he's very obsessed with Britney Spears. And then there's the old world where there are rituals. For example the Potlatch ritual of giving gifts – a native ritual. So it's really like this clash, and you do that a lot in your stories. I think it's so interesting. Where does that come from? Why do you do that? Why do you think of those pop-culture references, mixing them in with rituals, and small town contexts?

Lina: Coming back to my childhood, my teenage years, it was all connected. I was reading fairy tales, I was reading literature which came maybe too early. I could be another person without all this serious literature. But everything was coming from the West. It was coming from the USA, because we still have family members living abroad in Chicago, and they were bringing some gifts to us in Lithuania. And of course we have the idea what MTV is, and the internet and so on, but for example, in my house the internet was settled down when I was 15, so it was quite late. And these MTV shows and TV stars and pop stars came a bit late. So this Adidas stuff is something that you can buy now in Lithuania, but for us it was like 'wow, it's new!'. So for me, it was like the same, if I'm reading a family tale about witches–

Uschi: Like an old myth, or a new myth of Britney Spears. So I think it's very brave to do that in literature, I think it's very fresh and new, and I think that's why Lina is a perfect fit for the Nieuwe Tijd festival, where we are today. I think it's a brave choice to do that, because it's two different worlds colliding.

You also, in that story, go to that Potlatch ritual, that is actually outlawed by the Canadian government, which can marginalise the people who still want to do that, the native people. Is that important to you when you write your stories, to bring those voices that aren't heard that much, or that maybe aren't seen that much, to your stories?

Lina: Yeah I think that each story which is hidden, it should exist, and I find these stories and these characters unique. For me, everything that is not perfect, these imperfections, make everything authentic. That's why I love digging into old stories, and mixing them together with something like–

Uschi: Like the details, you're very good in the details, in the specifics. That makes it really *real*, you know. So in this story, I wanted to read a passage that really got to me:

But water was a hypocrite, who pretended to be clear, but in fact was always muddled at the bottom. A knife thrown down into it, if seen from the bridge, would shine like a polished spoon. Water is a hypocrite in which you do not know what is changing: the object you are watching, or your own perception of the world in which the knife and the spoon become an undivided whole. It feeds and cuts one at the same time.

So for me when I read that, I got the story a lot better. For me, the knife and the spoon symbolise society, where people are sometimes stuck. Am I right in that interpretation? Because you have a lot of philosophical 'in-betweens', which I also love if people dare to do that, like dare to involve your reader in a philosophical aside. So, is that something...?

Lina: Yeah I think so. I think that there's no wrong or right answers, and I love to hear what you have read from that. But yeah, I think that I love different perspectives. I love to zoom in and zoom out – both in my life and my personal life, and then writing. So actually that's one of the main reasons why I write, because I want to show that we don't live in a world which is that way, or another way. We have a lot of stories, and a lot of truths.

Uschi: So the interpretation of the reader is important to you?

Lina: Yeah.

Uschi: I understand. So another story I read is *Colour is a Feeling*, and it's about a very peculiar boy, Lump, who gets hit by his father with an axe on his head, and he loses his ability to see colour. But it's also about washing machines, it's also about the matrix, it's crazy but amazing. And so you have this ability to brush over things that have happened, like the axing of a boy, but you go into the details of the washing machine. That is just really a wonderful way to bring a story to your reader. So we already talked about it for a bit, but do you think about your reader when you're writing a story? You said you want to communicate, but are you already thinking about how this will enter the reader's mind? Or do you write first for yourself?

Lina: Actually I don't have any plans when I am starting to write. I have a story – I like to find the best atmosphere to develop the character, and if I were to think about my reader, then I should know exactly who is reading. Because I met the people who read my book, and I couldn't

believe how they found this book, why they were younger than me, older than me. It's a lot of feedback! And if I were to try to stick to one exact reader, or a group of readers, an exact audience, it would be too hard.

Uschi: So you want to reach a lot of different people, different ages?

Lina: I like to read some literature that is universal. I think that the most important things in life don't belong somewhere exactly, with a 10 year old reader or a 20 year old reader. The first thing I want to do is tell a story.

Uschi: You told us already that you're writing something new – a novel – so could you tell us what it is about? In what phase are you? Are you still making up the story? Are you already writing?

Lina: I have a lot of material, and it's always changing. Sometimes I think that it's almost done, and then a new idea arises. I think that the main topic will be poverty, and what comes from that. It will be a story about a family living in the 90's. I won't say which town, because I'm trying to make it universal.

Uschi: You haven't chosen yet which town? Or you know but you don't want to say?

Lina: It is like a town, but I'm not offering the name of the town, in which part it is—

Uschi: You mean it's a symbolic place?

Lina: Yeah, I'm trying to create an artificial town, something like that.

Uschi: I really look forward to it then! And I also really look forward to the English translation of that book. But you also do more than write, which I also admire a lot. You have a literary project, *Blunkanti sofa*, which means 'fading couch', in which you are investigating anxiety by talking to other writers about anxiety in their work, but also in their lives. I think that's very interesting. How did that happen? How did you come up with that idea?

Lina: Actually this project came from my own anxiety. I think it's like one of the, I don't know, it's not like the most popular, it's so common nowadays. So that's why I decided to read what others have written, because I live in Lithuania with a community of writers and poets. I started to read their works and take interviews to examine this theme of anxiety and how it's reflected in their poetry. I found they are so connected, despite the fact that one writer can be translated to many languages, and another is just trying to publish his/her first book. I think that this theme, or topic, is important, especially now.

Uschi: I think it's universal, for people who make things, or who are creative, that there is some anxiety in the making process, or the creative process. So you said somewhere that anxiety makes you feel powerless, 'this is how it turns subjects into objects'. Do you think it can also

have a good effect on a writer or a creative person to have some anxieties and fears, or is it always a negative?

Lina: Oh no, I think that anxiety is at first, some kind of warning that something is not working, something is not good. Maybe you need some changes, or to think about what's going on. But if it's that kind of anxiety which really makes you an object, you cannot move and you're too afraid to do anything, when it comes hard to communicate and to enjoy life, that's a problem. And I think that that kind of anxiety, it's healthy. Because if I wouldn't feel anxious now, perhaps it would mean that this is not important.

Uschi: That's true. I think it can be a signal, like you said, and also your project might help alleviate the bad anxiety we don't want to have by talking about it. So I wanted to ask one more thing: you graduated from film drama studies, and you also started a master's degree in intermedial literature. You also make performances with music. Is that multidisciplinary and those hybrid forms – is that important to you? And how do you see that evolving in your literary career as an artist?

Lina: Well first, I was always imagining myself as a writer. But we live in such times, where they are offering many media forms, so it would be really sad if I just sit and just write, and I don't care about the presentations of my books, or events or readings or anything. That's why I love combining these different arts, to ask some musicians or composers to create something for readings for example. I think that it brings your idea more clear–

Uschi: Because you can use different things that complement each other.

Lina: Exactly.

Uschi: Interesting. I wanted to ask you, because of all your projects and talking to you, do you think that writing can change the world? And do you have that ambition? Or is your ambition a bit smaller than that?

Lina: I'm not sure if I can change the world. At least I can try to change something that's inside me. I think that literature as an art form is changing a lot, and I can also add to that. I'm living near Ukraine, where the war is. And, it's really sad – not even sad, it's [terrible]. For me, literature is a form of survival. That's what I wanted to say.

Uschi: It's beautiful. Thank you so much. I think it's clear that we have a good future in literature if you keep writing and keep working. So this wraps up the interview, but I wanted to announce to you that now we will hear an excerpt of the short story *Star Wars*, and it will be read by Lina, but also by her translator Anita van der Molen. It's out of the book *Town Festival*, and you can also read the full story on the Notulen van het Onzichtbare – that's the place at Wintertuin where you can read texts, and it's online. So an applause for Lina and for Anita.

[applaus]

Anita:

Ooit was ik een ochtendmens. Met een Sony camera die in- en uitzoomde, ontdekte ik hele, steeds wisselende werelden in mijn kleine provinciestedje. Ik ontdekte een besneeuwde en met ijs bedekte zuivelfabriek, die me vroeger zo ver weg en vreemd had geleken, als een gebouw dat je niet in je eentje moest bezoeken, want nadat ik achter zijn vreselijke geheim zou zijn gekomen, zou ik nooit meer dezelfde zijn als voorheen. Ik ontdekte straten die nergens naartoe leidden en wanneer ik op een hek stuitte met het opschrift 'privéterrein', moest ik omkeren naar de alleen aan mij bekende en mysterieuze verlaten gebouwen bij het voormalige politiebureau, naar wijken waar in de besneeuwde velden nog sneeuwkllokjes bloeien en pas wanneer de sneeuw is gesmolten en alle mogelijke winterfeesten achter de rug zijn, inclusief Valentijnsdag, kun je zien hoe alles uiteindelijk werkelijk is herdacht, gevierd en overal is neergegoid. Het enige dat overblijft is afval, tassen, kapotte flessen en bekertjes met afdrukken van rode lippenstift.

Ooit was ik een ochtendmens en had ik geen wekker nodig om op te staan, want wanneer ik de irritante melodie van papa's of mama's wekker hoorde, stond ik al op het punt om te vertrekken.

Toen ik een ochtendmens was, keek ik graag naar de flatgebouwen van Mažeikiai, de dichtstbijzijnde, de iets verder weg of helemaal in de verte gelegen complexen. Ze hadden vijf, negen of twaalf verdiepingen. Ik observeerde hoe in de appartementen de ene na de andere lamp aanging en ramen oplichtten, waarachter groene of rode gordijnen zichtbaar werden. Mensen houden van het gevoel van veiligheid en privacy, zelfs wanneer de dag nog niet is aangebroken.

Ik was juist het tegenovergestelde van gezelligheid en warmte, van een kop hete Earl Grey met melk. Zij waren alles wat ik nog niet had kunnen worden – met zachte baguettes met salami, broodjes met poedersuiker en stokbrood met pindakaas. Op die ochtenden kon ik niet eens aan eten denken, omdat ik wist dat ik in de lente een uur of twee na de dageraad terneergeslagen mijn verouderende digitale Sony zou inschakelen en scherpstellen om Maxima's mosterd, ingelegde gesneden augurken en afgeprijsde bananen te fotograferen. Het ontbijt bestond uit mijn verlangen om met mijn camera op de vijfde verdieping de stoomwolken te vangen, die zich uit de ketel een weg naar buiten baanden, de kopjes met blauwe oren en de suikerklontjes, die in de thee- of koffiekopjes zonken en

oplosten als enorme, vermoeide Titans, en niemand hoorde Jack en Rose roepen, omdat ze wisten dat echte en vooral eerste liefde begint en eindigt met verdriet.

Lina:

Jai buvo penkiolika be trijų dienų ir jos lagaminuose gulėjo drabužiai ir daiktai, net ir tas pernykštis STAR WARS Monopolis su Luku, kurio kardas jau buvo nulaužtas, su Veideriu, kurio apsiaustas atrodė gerokai nutrintas, ir su princese Lėja, kuria, regis, niekada taip ir nežaista, nes jos suknelė iš geležies ir alavo mišinio vis dar dailiai žvilgėjo, tarsi ką tik išpakuota pernykščių Kalėdų metu. Tai buvo paskutinės Kalėdos su Vita.

Kalėdų naktį Vita liko nakvoti namuose. Ji išsitiesė lovoje, apžiūrinėjo amerikietiškas gumytes plaukams, šiugždino saldinių popierėlius ir vieną po kito intensyviai kramtė šokoladukus. Galiausiai nukreipė naktinę lemputę į mano pusę ir ilgai žiūrėjo.

O tu nenori susirast moters? Nu, tipo, tau jau dvim penki ir dar nemačiau nei su viena. Nenori?

Mano skruostai išraudo tarsi paauglio, kuriam neauga barzda. Buvau pralaimėtos krepšinio varžybos, kai ji buvo teisėjo švilpukas. Buvau tarsi apšnerkšta, niekinga Palangos pakrantė, o ji buvo švelnus ir pūkuotas, skalbinių minkštikliu kvepiantis rankšluostis, į kurį susivynioja žmonės, išlipę iš sterilių baseinų pietų kurortuose.

Anita:

Ik heb het gevoel dat ik geen ochtendmens meer ben. Op zeventwintig december bestel ik een taxi en ga ik naar Jurga in een dorp buiten Mazeikiai. Het is de eerste keer dat ik me zorgvuldig scheer. De eerste keer in mijn leven. Ik koop nieuw, zwart ondergoed en gooi het oude met de zeezwaluwen weg. Aan mijn voeten voel ik het katoen van nieuwe, zwarte sokken. Ik trek een schoon shirt aan, dat ik voor het laatst op mijn eindexamenfeest heb gedragen. Ik poets mijn schoenen en mijn tanden. Ik poets mijn tanden verschillende keren, maar de ruimtes ertussen blijven donker, hoewel ik nooit met roken ben gestopt of zelfs maar ben begonnen. Omdat ik niet weet wat ik moet kopen om Jurga niet nerveus te maken, vertrek ik met het meest banale doosje Raffaello, dat doet denken aan bloed dat in de sneeuw is gevloeid. Jurga lacht en noemt me Romeo en ik tel de

rozen op het behang van haar woonkamer om maar geen onzin uit te kramen. En dat is zeker welsprekender dan duizend woorden.

Ik keek naar haar lippen. Het parelmoer was er een beetje af. Ze schonk vermouth in. Die begon meteen te branden in mijn maag, ik werd dronken, probeerde op een en hetzelfde moment naar een film met Ryan Gosling te kijken en haar handen te voelen, die plastisch mijn benen aanraakten. Ik voelde dat ik haar wilde. Zonder het einde van de film af te wachten, begonnen we te kussen. Ik had mijn ogen dicht en zag alleen de ene na de andere trein in de mist passeren, you keep me under your spell, you keep me under your spell, en een onoverkomelijke golf van angst overspoelde me. Ik wilde uit Jurga's huis verdwijnen, opstaan van de sofa, wachten totdat het licht zou worden en dan wanhopig alles fotograferen. Jurga noemde me Romeo en zag duidelijk dat ik een jongen van vijftwintig was, die beefde en ervandoor wilde gaan naar de mist van zijn Mažeikiai, om te verdwijnen in de knipperende neon etalages van de winkels. Rood en blauw schreeuwden me tegemoet. De film was afgelopen.

[applaus]

Lina: Thanks Anita.

Uschi: Ok, thank you everybody. It's over I think. Thank you for reading, and also the story you've just heard, you can find it online and read it as a whole. Go do that, because it's really good. Thank you!

Voiceover 1: *Lina is nog de hele maand november writer-in-residence. Ben je benieuwd naar meer van haar werk? Lees dan verder op notulenvanhetonzichtbare.nl. Daarnaast schrijft Lina aan het einde van de residentie over haar ervaringen in Nijmegen, die vertaald en gepubliceerd worden na haar vertrek. Houd de kanalen van Wintertuin in de gaten voor meer informatie over deze publicatie.*

Voiceover 2: *Dit was een podcast van Wintertuin, aangesloten bij De Nieuwe Oost. Volg ons via jouw favoriete podcastapp voor meer podcasts over verhalen, literatuur en schrijven. Tot de volgende keer!*