

Flesh Coloured Dominoes by Zigmunds Skujins
Review by Denise, edited by Alexa.

Our choice for June was *Flesh Coloured Dominoes* by the Latvian writer, Zigmunds Skujins. This surreal novel is split into two parts, one story set in the 18th century, and the other in the 20th (during World War II). One story is about a family in a Latvian town enduring the multiple occupations (Russian and German) of World War II. However, these individuals cannot be separated from earlier times. Surrounding the child protagonist is lush detail of the times, the characters and their interactions. In the fanciful world, lives overlap and intermingle, reflecting the author's palpable enthusiasm as he enlivens the characters.

The protagonist was raised by his wise, imaginative grandfather who disdains conformity. But his ideas became dangerous when the Nazis and then the Soviets arrive in Latvia, when taking on a conforming identity was a matter of life and death. Skujins presents identity as both a genetic and philosophical link, and he explores the meaning of a collective identity. When the child asks, "Is nationality determined by what's in your blood?" his grandfather explains this in terms of powers, totality and connections. The melancholy meditation on the nature of personal and national identity is thought-provoking, and the shaping of the boy becomes a narrative in itself.

Meanwhile, the plot alternates with the character, Baroness Valtraute von Breugen, who represents the eighteenth-century misadventures of the Baltic German aristocracy and the Romanovs of Russia. Very complex and intimate relationships develop. When the Baroness mourns the death of her husband, she meets Count Cagliostro, an occultist, charlatan, and adventurer. This man actually existed, starting life as Giuseppe Balsamo in Palermo, and whose astounding associations included Goethe, the Pope, Cardinal Orsini, Benjamin Franklin and Marie Antoinette. Cagliostro travels with a very colourful retinue: a hermaphrodite chambermaid, a dwarf, a German with five chins, and a raven-like astrologer.

Cagliostro tells the Baroness that half of her husband still exists, and she travels to meet Ulste who purports to be his other half. The question is, which half of a man represents his identity. She sleeps with Ulste/her half-husband and becomes pregnant. Two discrete parts make a new whole, whether it be people, nationalities, countries or concepts. A delightful complication occurs when the Baron von Breugen returns alive and whole. Learning of his wife's pregnancy, he suicides.

Back in the 20th century, the grandfather's surname is revealed to be Ulste. The two histories start to solidify. While both periods reflect each other's traditions and modern views, both show characters facing their ignorance of history.

This novel is informative about Latvian history. In her afterword, Kaija Straumanis, the translator, explained how she had blended original Latvian text outlining history or explaining phrases into the novel.

Our reading group had an appreciation for this novel, recognising it as clever, superbly written and an enjoyable read. It is a little surreal, sometimes farcical, rather humorous, often irreverent, and riddled with clever word-play.

It was acknowledged, however, that it is not a particularly easy read initially and does take some adjustment before the reader can be immersed in this pleasurable romp. Another criticism was that the final chapters were mostly extraneous, with the author unnecessarily emphasising the didactic content.

Overall, a delightful addition to our year of reading.