

The writer, Laima Vincė, first conceived of the idea for her novel, *This Is Not My Sky* (Lithuanian: *Tai ne mano dangus*) when the United States declared war on Iraq. At the time hers was an emotional response, an individual protest against military aggression, which would bring along with it extreme traumatization in the consciousness of both individuals and society, as well as in the cultural memory of the nations involved in war. While teaching Creative Writing workshops at the University of Southern Maine, Laima Vincė experienced watching her classes shrink as more and more students were sent to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan with Maine's National Guard or with the United States military. She experienced what could be called a metaphysical moment of injustice. She saw in a very direct way how the fragility of a single individual's existence was compromised by the cruelty of what could be expressed as, "the military system." The writer's overwhelming sense of this impending tragedy reflected not only her concerns as an American citizen, but resonated with the tragedy of the Lithuanian nation during World War II and the postwar years. The annihilation of Lithuanian families and the massive deportations to Siberia, the Soviet occupation, and the forced emigration of Lithuanians to the United States, consumed this writer's imagination for fifteen years until all that became the basis of this novel's narrative history and its central theme.

The novel opens with an excerpt from the gnostic poem, "Thunder, Perfect Mind": "I am the first and the last./I am the honored one and the scorned one./I am the whore, and the holy one. ... I am the goddess, and I am the one,/Whose God is great." The language of this poem gently, subtly, and somewhat secretively, reveals one of the main themes of this novel—the ambivalent experience of a woman's sense of individuality and her complicated search for identity. Especially significant are the poem's references to whores and holy women, which echo the biblical figures of Mary Magdalene and Holy Mary Mother of God, who make an appearance in the novel. These two contrasting religious figures are connected into one in Maria, the heroine of the novel. A similar duality dominates the work of Lithuanian emigre writer, Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė, in her novel, *Aštuoni Lapai* (*Eight Leaves*) (1956). In both of

these novels women experience the horrors of war: humiliation, rape. However, similiary in both novels the female characters are spiritually inspired by the image of Holy Mary, who shows them that all women carry within them the possibility of motherhood, the seed of redemption through starting a new life.

From her early childhood, Maria, the heroine of *This Is Not My Sky*, is a religious and sincere Catholic. She somewhat naively dreams of marrying and creating a harmonious Catholic family, and then living a safe, even idyllic, life. However, Maria's rosey dream is destined to be shattered from her early adolescence onwards. She is fated to experience the horrors of World War II, and then the postwar anti-Soviet armed resistance and the massive deportations of Lithuanians to Siberia. These events erase even the possibility of a humane, civilized existence. Maria's mother, Nora (full name – Eleonora) agrees to shelter a resistance fighter in her home. They address him familiarly as Uncle Rimas. Maria's mother formally agrees to risk her daughters' lives in exchange for Lithuania's freedom. She promises the leader of the local resistance that if Rimas is arrested or if their house is surrounded by Soviet security forces, that their house will be exploded together with all of them inside of it. Nora is even taught how to handle a pistol, and if necessary, how to shoot herself with it...

This is one of the most difficult dilemmas the heroic Nora must endure, one that is reminiscent of the Biblical story of Abraham, when he is asked by God to sacrifice his son. Nora's drama is saturated with a burning silence. The relentless stress of the situation weighs heavily on this courageous woman's shoulders. She must consciously sacrifice her flesh and blood—her children, who she'd raised alone in the most dire of conditions, and whom she loves with all her heart—while living the entire time with the thought of their deaths hanging over her. In that silence she must overcome her heaviest doubts and not betray herself—beneath the armour of her silence she hides an existential horror.

It is noteworthy that the inspiration for Nora's character is the historic woman, Eleonora Labanauskienė, who sheltered two leaders of the resistance, Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas and Juozas Lukša-Daumantas, in her home for almost a year. Eleonora and her husband, Vincas, just like the protagonists in the novel, consciously agreed to explode themselves if the Soviet army were to surround their home. Other characters in the novel are also inspired by historic truths: the love story of Ona and Bronius is based on the actual love story of the liaison woman Eleonora Rubine and her beloved partisan, poet, artist Bronius. They fought together with General Jonas Žemaitis. Vladas Pilvelis represents the stereotypical middle-aged, wealthy, bachelor engineer—there were many men like him who came out of the displaced persons (DP) camps of the allied territories of Germany and Austria after the war. The characters Žygimantas and Barbara reflect the names of the historic Grand Duke of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy and his beloved Barbora Radvilaitė. Yet it is important to take note that these characters similarity to these historic figures is crafted in a subtle way. Certain names have been appropriated, as well as certain important historic events; however, the necessary artistic transformation takes place, as well as an aesthetic transformation. The characters in this novel are endowed with a rich emotional life, complete with dreams, and with necessary detailed biographical facts and background information. Sometimes the text becomes ironic and the characters' motivations for certain sins are exposed. Therefore, this novel is not a documentary novel, nor is it a strictly historical novel. History is used to create a realistic background upon which a rich imaginative narrative unfolds.

The sense of a true historic reality in this fictional novel is created not only by the expert use of a detailed historical backdrop and carefully constructed psychological portraits of the characters, but also by the voice and style of the writing. The author's style is easily accessible and fluent. Metaphors are applied sparsely: “She must carry the freezing temperatures of Eastern Europe around inside of her” or “The color plates were faded and the tones were off, just like the lives of people left

behind the Iron Curtain were faded, drained of color, devoid of tone.” The author plays dynamically with language. In psychologically charged moments (when the Russians search the house, when there is the risk of the bomb being detonated, when the teacher interrogates the girls) the author crafts such intense dramatic tension that in the culmination of the scene the reader practically hears an existential scream.

Additionally, every character has his or her own original, unique, manner of speaking that reflects that character's appropriate worldview, timeframe, and social stature. While Žygimantas speaks broken English peppered with flirtatious comments, Milda uses slang and a heavy dose of adolescent irony. Baba speaks only Lithuanian, and uses many archaic words and phrases. Cathy's voice is interesting because her vocabulary and tone reflect back the privileged situation of an only child surrounded by indulgent loving adults. In her childish chatter we hear the intonations of the adults around her. Maria's speech is the most dynamic. As she grows up and matures throughout the novel, we hear her speech mature and her vocabulary expand, gaining more and more depth and insight.

In the Prologue, when Cathy arrives unexpectedly in Maria's home, Maria weaves her a Lithuanian national costume. This act takes on not only the ritual of creating an ethnographic traditional gift for Cathy, but also is heavy with symbolism. The cloth is “woven” together, just like the novel is woven together. There is not one character that appears in this novel that is not somehow connected to the central narrative.

In fact, many of the fates of the characters are woven together in several dramatic narrative threads. For example, Cathy's nanny is a Puerto Rican woman who lives in the same walk-up as Maria's family. Žygimantas starts a love affair with Barbara, the woman who adopted Cathy, his own biological daughter. Milda becomes Cathy's

friend. Uncle Rimās's wife meets Maria in America... The characters' lives are twisted together like a net: On their own or separate from each other they could not function or exist. A tight community built on connection is revealed. This novel bears witness to the unique way that the individual cannot exist alone and for himself/herself only. It is not possible to interpret one's life without examining the many threads of connection that tie it to others. Each detail viewed on its own is open to misinterpretation, engenders chaos, or ambiguity.

Therefore, from the first glance the novel's history is a woven textile; however, that textile has no lack of "meaningful" holes. It is not clear why Rimās disappears. The reasons why Cathy is given up for adoption remain murky. Žygimantas's alcoholism, Milda's self-destruction, and the fate of Vanda and Vilma after their painful parting with Maria, remain unresolved. Some holes created by events in the novel are slowly woven back together later, while others remain in the shadows, behind the theater curtains.

Perhaps the writer is trying to show us how elusive it is to try to understand this world—certain life tragedies will always remain a mystery. One can only learn how to live with them for decades, perhaps even until death. The most dramatic example of this enigma is the separation of the three sisters. The leader of the resistance, Perkūnas, tells Maria she must go live in Poland, but he gives her sisters, Vanda and Vilma, away to a Soviet orphanage. Maria, as the eldest daughter, promised her mother that she would take care of her sisters. But she is forced to break her promise and leave them behind. The scene when they must part ways seems to slow down and enlarge time. Time stands still as Maria must make her choice, as she raises her doubts, as she considers several different outcomes, until finally a stranger comes and calmly calls the two little girls to her side and slowly, calmly, leads them away, as though they were going out into the forest to pick berries... Maria feels a heavy weight on her heart as she watches them disappear into the forest. She wonders if her sisters even understand that they may never see her

again. Their parting is reminiscent of the metaphor of the lost paradise of childhood—once you set out on that path that leads away from home there is no way back. Maria never receives any news about her sisters. They never go home... The memory that is seared into Maria's mind—the way the woman calmly walks off into the forest holding her sisters' hands, as though going berry-picking, is a metaphor for the existential loss of loved ones. The characters in this novel never know when they will find themselves in uncharted territory. Anything can happen that will hurl them into an unknown situation without any clear outcome. Their daily lives are subject to being uprooted at any given moment. Today you are in Lithuania, but tomorrow you may find yourself on the other side of the earth...

Existential questions regarding a woman's growth as an individual, her search for identity, her search for self, are always raised at the core of the novel. Every female character bears a symbolic name and has her own unique interpretation of what it means to be a woman. The main protagonist, Maria, based on Carl Jung's archetype theory, embodies the symbolism of womanhood. Maria reflects: "Instead of the power of her beauty, now she had another power, the power of motherhood." For the greater part of her life Maria raises her children, takes care of her home—that is her source of spiritual energy, her wellspring of motivation. However, once her children are grown she is able to hear her own unique inner voice—she longs to know herself, to find her calling. She begins to work, she goes to a local college and earns a degree in literature, later she moves out of her husband's home and goes to Florida, where she becomes a professional weaver of the Lithuanian national costume. Maria's portrait is one of the most developed, and dynamic, characterizations in the novel's narrative: She grows up from a young, but brave, girl who helped the partisans as a liaison girl, to a naive young woman, to a married woman who falls in love outside of her marriage, to a grown woman with a sense of humor who knows how to defend herself. Ultimately, she becomes an independent artist. The novel consistently documents Maria's growth and evolution as an individual, her maturing mind, her traumas, and finally her release from trauma through healing.

Another interesting character is “the Other Maria”—Uncle Rimas's beloved. She finds Maria in America and wants to talk with her about the past. It is clear that this is not her real name, but a symbolic name that renders her Maria's doppelganger. This woman experiences a romantic, intoxicating love affair with Rytas Vilkas (Uncle Rimas), which is cut short when Rimas returns behind the Iron Curtain on a reconnaissance mission for the American CIA. Despite the tragic end to their romance, this woman experienced what Maria longed to experience and lacked in her life—a fulfilling spiritual love that was requited. Perhaps this is the reason why the writer created this mysterious doppelganger, who unexpectedly tracks Maria down in America and shocks her to the point that Maria loses consciousness.

Later, the great beauty, Barbara, inserts herself into Maria's family. Barbara is an aristocratic, sophisticated forty-year-old woman, who because of her husband's impotence decides to adopt a baby. Unexpectedly, at the height of her womanhood, she experiences a blind passion and physical attraction for another man (Žygimantas) and loses all sense of reality over her desire to possess him. She is a hedonistic aristocrat. Barbara and the object of her desire do not match, rather they negate the Lithuanian cultural memory of the legendary love affair between Žygimantas Augustas and Barbora Radvilaitė. The Grand Duke Žygimantas Augustas is prepared to sacrifice everything for Barbora, whom he considers his soul mate. He mourns her death his entire life. However, in Laima Vincė's novel, Žygimantas (who is usually simply called, Ziggy) is a typical Don Juan, who quickly replaces one woman with another. Barbara is ready to give up everything for Žygimantas and follow him to the ends of the earth on a moment's notice, but that does not inspire any feelings of authentic tenderness in him for her. Žygimantas's mother, Baba, represents the archetype of the healer and prophet. This ancient woman is skilled in a number of verbal incantations, magical formulas, and in the use of healing with herbs, which she stubbornly tries to apply to the family's

illnesses. According to tradition, she must pass on her knowledge and her power to the first born child or the last born. She chooses Cathy.

The narrative introduces us to an important bit of folk wisdom: If someone gives a pregnant woman the evil eye, the soul of the child may split into two. Eventually, one of the two must die so that the other may live. The soul that survives leads the other soul back to the crossroads. The cross standing in the crossroads guides the lost soul home. This mystical story helps the reader understand the symbolic meaning behind the characters of the two sisters, Milda and Cathy. The two girls are sisters; however, for certain reasons the younger sister, Cathy, is given away to an American family to raise. The result is that the two sisters experience totally different lives, which form their personalities. Cathy is adored by her adoptive father, Bill, who raises her in a luxurious home. She receives the best education money can buy and becomes a doctoral student at prestigious Columbia University. Meanwhile, her sister Milda experiences poverty, neglect and abuse, her father's alcoholism and her mother's depression. She loses her God Mother, who is her only lifeline, and then loses her mother when she relocates to Florida. This chain of painful life events lead Milda into a life of escapism through drugs and sexual experimentation. Eventually she succumbs to AIDS and dies an early death. Although Cathy's archetype is that of the rescuer and the healer, she cannot prevent her sister from escaping her fate, death. Milda parts with Cathy with these words: "My ruined body, my dying body, is a symbol of occupied Lithuania. ... My body is an occupied country. ... But you Cathy, you're pure. ... You can be a part of the new Lithuania. You can go there and do something good for the people." Milda becomes Cathy's shadow, her antagonist, her double. She symbolizes a Lithuania that has been raped, defiled, humiliated, a Lithuania that has lost its soul. Such a country cannot be healthy and vibrant. The only path left is death and rebirth.

The novel masterfully opens up the complicated concept of psychological trauma. According to Professor Danutė Gailienė, in her book *What They Did To Us* (Ką jie

mums padarė, 2008), the most difficult traumas happen in childhood, or they occur over a long period of time. There are two types of trauma: Individual trauma and cultural trauma. Often one masks the other. An individual who has experienced trauma struggles with looping repetitive thoughts and images, and is often haunted with nightmares. In the novel, *This Is Not My Sky*, the reader is exposed to many various traumas: the loss of loved ones (the tragic death of both Maria and Žygimantas's families in Siberia, Milda's death, the murder of Baba's baby), violence (the Russian soldiers beat and rape Nora in front of her children, Žygimantas hits his children), sexual violence (experienced by Nora, Maria, and Milda). The research of Holocaust scholars reveals that trauma is passed down in families to children and grandchildren.

We see an analogical situation in the novel. Although they live in America, because both Maria and Žygimantas have experienced trauma caused by the Soviet occupation, they raise psychologically wounded children: Milda becomes a drug addict, Tadas is in jail. It were as though this novel collects all its characters into one meaningful plane that represents the entire spectrum of twentieth century cultural trauma experienced by Lithuanians. Most of them suffer and find their own methods of escaping the horrors of their pasts. Žygimantas is paranoid, fearing a Russian invasion of America, which leads him to drown himself in alcoholism. Maria nurtures her depression. Baba shuts herself off from the world in her own mystical realm. Ona isolates herself from the people of her village and meets with her dead lover, Bronius, in her dreams. Maria and Cathy both experience trauma dreams. As a child Cathy has a recurring dream of seeing her barefoot ancestors disappearing into snowdrifts. The present is crippled by the wounds of the past. It is difficult for these people to adapt, to experience any joy in their lives, any meaning. The most positive event in the novel takes place when Maria's daughter Cathy returns to her. Maria's newfound independence and the soothing work of weaving helps her find spiritual peace and to experience post-traumatic growth.

Because this novel encompasses themes that are highly relevant to us as individuals, to our families, to cultural discourse, and raises questions about serious problems in contemporary Lithuania—violence against children, women, sexual violence, depression, the loss of loved ones, identity confusion experienced by Lithuanian emigres and immigrants, the search for a meaningful life, familial relationships—it is relevant to both men and women, to the entirety of today's society. The novel becomes an odd type of history textbook while also a primer on psychology, while at the same time it functions as an expressive work of literature.

Who am I? What does it mean to be a Lithuanian? What has my nation experienced? Why are our life tragedies cloaked in silence? What does it mean to lose one's home, one's family, one's beloved? The characters in *This Is Not My Sky* seek to find the answers to these questions and to many more.