

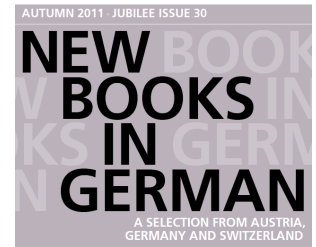
Novak's Grand Finale

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Translated by Lara Elder for *New Books in German*



Novak was in good spirits during these pleasant June days. In such good spirits that he even managed to write Manuela a card. When he tried to write letters he would keep re-starting and never get to the end. But he wrote the few lines he could fit on the back of this picture postcard quite spontaneously.

It showed the opera house, crowned with Pegasus statues, and had gold lettering across the blue sky above. It was odd he hadn't spotted this card before now, tucked in one of the revolving stands outside the newspaper kiosk at the underground station. How often he must have passed it on his way to the palace gardens when he took the underground instead of walking! But the stands had probably been facing a different way then, showing other postcards that didn't catch his attention.

As tacky as it was, the card with the opera house called out to him like a summons. So he went into the shop and bought it, along with the correct postage stamp. And he also bought a paper, which he then used to lean on as he wrote.

He installed himself right away in the nearest espresso bar, one of those ugly cafés you find in station complexes where it feels like you are sitting in a kind of terrarium. White plastic tables and chairs—the kind that look dirty at the best of times—smeared in grease, even if the waitress has just wiped them over with a damp sponge. But Novak had only noticed this in passing, and didn't really care. He wanted to seize the excitement he had felt on seeing the photo, write the card quickly and throw it in the nearest letterbox.

Dear Manuela, he wrote, I am thinking of you. I am thinking of you and listening to lots of operas. The cassettes you lent me while I was in hospital have awoken something inside me. They have stirred me – yes, that's the word for it.

Stirred me in a way I wouldn't have thought was possible before now. For weeks, I have been listening to one CD after another. Perhaps I'll soon be ready for a real visit to the opera.

He had to write this last sentence quite small as he was running out of space at the bottom of the card.

It was curious. He had just written something he had not even thought about until now. The thought that he could not only listen to but also *see* operas – not just in his imagination, which was surprisingly lively, if a little hazy in the detail, but for real, that is to say *staged* in a proper theatre – this thought had only just occurred to him. Perhaps it even frightened him a little. But there it was, a whole new perspective.

He gave the address as that of the hospital, which he could still recall. *For the attention of Sister Manuela, surgical ward.* Then he paid for the glass of mineral water, having drunk less than half of it, got up and left the newspaper he had been using to lean on on the table. He hadn't really taken in what was going on in the world for several weeks.

He was already standing in front of the letterbox next to the tobacconist's when it occurred to him that it might not be such a good thing if a third party were to read his note to Manuela. So he went back into the shop and bought an envelope, addressed it then and there at the counter, and paid for the stamp required to post a letter. This one had a nicer picture anyway – nicer than the other one he had stuck rather too hastily on the card. A blackbird on a green branch, singing.

The bird held its black head gracefully high and its yellow beak open. Distinctive. Novak remembered now: this stamp was one of a series that had been brought out a few years ago under the title *Native Songbirds*. There had been a blackbird, thrush, finch and starling – and an assortment of warblers too. That was before the Post Office had been privatised.

On the back of the envelope he wrote his own name and the address of his Bed and Breakfast. Manuela might want to drop him a line too. Of course – he couldn't really expect her to. Although it would be nice, he thought, as he let the envelope drop into the box, which must have been quite empty since it fell straight onto metal at the bottom, making a hollow clanging sound.

So that was done, anyway – Novak felt good as he took the escalator down to the underground. The platform was in the middle, here. Trains on the left-hand side went out of town and on the right-hand side they went in. Of course he had really meant to go to the palace gardens; he had his CD player with him as usual. But when he saw from the digital display that the train for the centre would come five minutes earlier than the other one, he changed his mind.

And with that he was off. The tunnel walls flashed past him in a blur. Six, seven stations and he was at the stop for Karlsplatz. Out he got, and then onto what seemed like a never-ending escalator to carry him to the top. But there at the top, at the end of the escalator, the opera house was waiting for him.

From this angle it appeared taller than it actually was, but it was certainly a great hulk of a building. A historical revival from sometime in the mid-nineteenth century when such things were still thought impressive. Neo-Renaissance or Neo-Baroque – Novak had learnt about it at school, but couldn't quite tell the two apart. At any rate, a building whose façade already seemed to signal its status as a guardian of high culture, to be approached with respect.

But Novak wouldn't be intimidated, not now. He walked briskly up to the loggia and tried to open one of the doors with handles that were set far too high. It proved to be locked, as did the next door along, and a third. Apparently you couldn't get into the opera house from the front at this time of the day.

Hardly surprising, he reflected, since it was still only early. The box-office probably didn't open until later. He glanced around, suddenly embarrassed that his behaviour had betrayed him as a complete novice of an operagoer. But no one appeared to be paying him any attention.

Then he did a clockwise lap of the opera house. There must be an advance sales box office somewhere, surely! Along two sides of the building he passed nothing but stage doors and emergency exits. On the third side, as he was already nearing the front again, he passed under a covered walkway which offered some shade at least, and had a number of display cases containing photos of various performances.

Singers, both men and women, all heavily made up. They struck Novak as fake, somehow. Faces like masks. But they probably seemed less so when you were sitting a

certain distance away from the stage. They just shouldn't have been photographed so close up.

There were programmes on display too. Programmes of previous performances, but also the one for this evening. Richard Wagner's *Walküre* – well that'd suit me well enough, thought Novak. But where you were supposed to buy the tickets remained a mystery to him.

A group of Japanese visitors came to his rescue. These people probably knew their way about. They were crossing the street with purpose, so Novak simply followed along behind. His intuition proved correct: five minutes later he was standing in the advance sales office.

Only it wasn't that easy to navigate your way around here, either. Studying the various programmes on display was already bewildering enough. And then there were different price categories for the various performances. Price Band C, Band P, Band A, Band B – what was all that supposed to mean?

The tickets were also divided into different classes. Sections of the seating plan were marked by different colours. The slightly more affordable areas were clearly already sold out for the next few performances. Even those whose price shocked Novak when he first saw it seemed to have only a few seats remaining.

He could forget this evening's *Walküre* in any case. But what other options were there, if any, in the foreseeable future? *Salome* on Monday, said the lady at the desk, and *Madame Butterfly* on Tuesday. Novak could not have said why, but he went for *Madame Butterfly*.

Of course he had a vague idea about both ladies. It is true he found *Salome* a little unnerving, whereas he felt a vague sympathy for *Madame Butterfly*. But was that really the reason for his decision? Perhaps it had more to do with the fact that he had a day longer before the performance of *Madame Butterfly* and wanted time to prepare himself for the occasion.

So *Madame Butterfly* it was. But it turned out there weren't many seats left for this either. Upper balcony on the far left-hand side with slightly restricted view, said the woman at the desk, or – yes, I still have something in the front row of box seven in the dress circle... What else could Novak do but take the box seat? After all, he did want a proper view of the stage on his first voluntary visit to the opera.

And so it was that he paid out over a hundred euros for an opera ticket – if Herta had known! For that sort of money, she'd have said, you could fly to Tenerife and back on a half-decent deal. She had often talked about offers of this kind, something we should try out some time, she had said on numerous occasions. But Novak had never really responded. He had no interest in Tenerife.

Of course he hadn't really been interested in opera back then either. And now ... really, it was quite ridiculous! Here he was spending that amount on a single performance! As he put away his ticket, he noticed he had barely ten Euros left in his wallet. Luckily there was a cash machine right here in the advance sales office.

He sat down in a café opposite and bought himself a cognac. This was also rather more expensive than he had expected. He needed to be careful, for sure. He was probably slightly overdrawn this month already. But right now he just wanted to look forward to his visit to the opera next Tuesday – it was Wednesday morning, shortly after ten o'clock, so he had almost a whole week of pleasant anticipation ahead.

[...]

Novak had no idea how long he had been lying on the bed like this. He didn't even know how much time had gone by since that evening at the opera. What did it matter anyway – it wasn't remotely important. Outside, beyond the curtains and shutters, days and nights were no doubt passing, but inside, in the darkness of his room, it was permanently twilight.

And it was good that way. More or less tolerable. It didn't hurt. A person could get used to this kind of state. Drifting. Nothing more. Just lying there and drifting. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, smelling nothing, tasting nothing, feeling nothing.

He remembered having read something once about how animals hibernate in the winter. How they reduced all their body functions to a minimum. How they succeeded in expending as little energy as possible. He didn't manage it completely – every now and then he had to get up for a drink of water, and would occasionally fumble around for a cracker from the packet on the floor by the bed – but it seemed to him a state worth striving for.

He also vaguely recalled that it was summer out there. Perhaps that was why it wasn't quite working. Maybe it just wasn't possible to hibernate in summer. In any case he had to go to the toilet sometimes too, although less and less often, it seemed.

Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, smelling nothing, tasting nothing, feeling nothing. And above all, thinking about nothing – a problem animals encountered rather less, perhaps. Yes, that was the issue: he hadn't managed to shut down his thoughts. Even if it was only half-conscious thinking, a kind of reverie in which he seemed to lose himself and his bearings, it was always there.

His thoughts circled round and round. For instance, round the question of the mole on Manuela's face. Namely whether or not he had seen it there at the opera house. Of course, he couldn't have seen it from his box seat ... The standing arena was too far away and the lighting down there was too dim ...

But then outside, just when he thought he'd lost sight of her ... She had been standing there, by the fountain ... The fountain he had walked past so often when he was still living in the city. And without ever really taking it in, without noticing the nymph that was perched on top of the column in the middle ...

Manuela had been standing there. He tried to recall the exact image ... To recall and then hold on to the memory in as much detail as possible ... He summoned all his energy, but it was tiring in his semi-conscious state ... As soon as he could more or less picture it, the image seemed to want to disappear again.

She had been standing there, half turned away from him ... But wasn't that the same thing as half turned towards him? In semi profile, in any case – he remembered the curve of her cheek ... But which cheek had it been – the left or the right?

Assuming it had been the right cheek, surely he must have been able to see it, the mole that is, sat high on her cheekbone, really quite distinctive, like a beauty spot? But which of her cheeks was the mole actually on – was it the right or the left? Strange he no longer knew for certain ... He tried to recall how he had sat next to her on the small white bench: always to her left, or so he thought, on the side where your heart is. But whenever he stepped outside himself, as it were, and stood back to view the scene as objectively as possible, it was as if he saw it in a mirror or in the SLR camera he had once owned years ago, where left was actually right, or rather right was actually left and the whole picture was upside down into the bargain.

The mole had occupied him for a long time in any case ... The mole, Manuela's special distinguishing mark ... Had he seen it or not? Had she had it or not? ... Just because he

hadn't *seen* it didn't mean that she hadn't *had* it, and even if she hadn't had it – what would that have told him?

It would only have told him that she had *no longer* had it ... Maybe she had had it removed ... It hadn't bothered him. He had even found it attractive ... But some people saw such things as a blemish ... And perhaps there had also been a medical reason for having it removed ... Perhaps a dermatologist had recommended it, and not just for cosmetic reasons ... Yes, that was possible. Such things happened ... In short: even if there had been *no* mole visible, on either her right or left cheek, it wouldn't have proved anything.

Novak kept coming to this conclusion. Even though it was some time now since he had been in that semi-comatose state. Whenever he thought about it, he would come to the same conclusion. Mind you, he tried hard to think about it as little as possible. Now that he was back in Grabern. On the road to recovery, as his wife put it. He didn't think about it very often, but it would come back to him sometimes nevertheless. And then it wasn't easy to divert his thoughts onto something else.

Like now, for instance, as he climbed up the hill with the shopping bags. And had to stop for a moment, because the bottles of healthy apple juice and jars of wild honey from the organic food store really were rather heavy. Herta was already at the window, keeping a look out for him. But there was nothing to be done: at this precise moment, it all came flooding back.

That fleeting image: Manuela by the fountain ... Maybe it was because he had paused and, for a few breaths, no longer able to hear his own footsteps, had heard instead the splashing of the kitsch fountain from the neighbour's garden ... Herta was waving ... Or was she trying to wipe something off the window? For a moment, he imagined she was trying to wipe away his thoughts.

At the end of August the blackbirds started dying. Novak found the first one under the apple tree. He would sometimes wander around the garden, from the cherry tree to the apple tree and back again. The cherries were shrivelled on the tree, while the apples were still unripe and green.

Novak stood for a long time looking at the blackbird. It lay there with its head tilted a little to one side and its beak slightly open. It was early evening, but it was already staring to

get dark before supper time now. Herta would soon call him into the house to eat. The wind that got up as soon as the sun went down was lightly ruffling the bird's feathers.

He found the second dead blackbird the following morning. He fetched a shovel from the shed and buried them both. In the evenings, in front of the television, Herta read aloud from an article in the local paper. He should've sent the blackbirds to the institute of veterinary medicine rather than bury them.

The virus that was spreading among the blackbird population was called *Usulu*. It originated in Africa, probably introduced by migrating birds. From Africa! said Herta. Of course! How typical! We all know nothing good ever comes from there.

One was supposed to wrap the dead birds in plastic and send them to either the pathology or virology department. *Institute of Veterinary Medicine* – Herta dictated the address to her husband. Just in case he should find more blackbird corpses in the next few days. Yes, yes, said Novak. But he gave the five other blackbirds he found over the course of the following week the same respectful burial he had given the first two.

At the beginning of September it got noticeably cooler. The mosquitoes which transmitted the disease began to die off. Or perhaps they weren't dying, but rather just beating a temporary retreat. Either way, Novak didn't find any more dead blackbirds.

Unfortunately there weren't many survivors. But every now and then one would land on the old television aerial. Would sing a few bars and then wait, apparently for an answer. If there was none, it would soon fly off again.

He missed the song of the blackbirds, but virtually all other noises got on his nerves. First there was a new street sweeper out and about, clearing the end-of-summer-season dust from all the streets in the neighbourhood. It was gigantic, with a battery of brooms and brushes that whirled around inside its garishly painted bodywork. As if it wasn't already enough that it set whole streets of houses vibrating, every time the driver put it in reverse it would emit idiotic beeping noises.

Then there was the maintenance being done on the entire district's gas and electricity lines. Novak had the impression these had been re-laid only a year ago, two at most, but perhaps the past few years had somehow merged together in his memory. In any case the

streets had to be torn up again as a result, there was nothing else for it, and the pneumatic drills and diggers inched forward one section at a time. And of course it was in everyone's interest that safety checks were carried out and that the energy supplies were working without a hitch in time for the coming cold season.

Apparently this bout of communal activity had a motivating effect. The neighbour to the right, whose working hours had been cut, was using his new-found leisure time to devote himself to a number of his own home improvements. He was naturally the proud owner of a *Black & Decker*. Whenever he stepped outside his front door to smoke a cigarette, for which he needed his right hand, he would hold the drill in his left like a cop in a TV series would his revolver, not pointing it at anyone in particular, nonchalant yet always ready for action. Back inside the house he would return to his work with gusto, the windows wide open of course, since it was hot work, and the radio turned up full blast, with two permanently cheerful presenters vying to outdo each other's jokes in the pauses between adverts.

As for the neighbours to the left, they were, thank heavens, still in full-time employment. But when they came home, the children would play around in the garden. The youngest had very advanced toys – after all, he too would soon have to face up to the challenges of the modern world and needed to be as well prepared as possible. A radio-controlled caterpillar bulldozer, for instance, which the little tyke handled with a terrifying look of seriousness and which housed a robot who responded to his every command with an *Aye Aye Sir* or *Roger*.

It went without saying that there was a diligent mowing of lawns in all directions. Many of the neighbours seemed to approach the task in the manner of a daily shave. Indeed some of them would do it first thing in the morning, a habit apparently acquired over the course of the summer. But those who hadn't managed to fit it in during the morning would do it without fail in the early evening, as soon as they got home.

Of course, Novak couldn't count himself out of this. For the first few weeks after his return to Grabern, Herta had given him a break and taken care of it herself. But how would it be in the long run? You're the man of the house, she said. And it's about time you started getting your act together again.

Getting your act together. No doubt she understood this rather differently from him. For him, he sensed, it could signify something else entirely. But he was still half dazed and his head, sitting there between his shoulders, felt strange. Perhaps it was because of his fall at the market, which he hadn't told Herta anything about.

In fact he had told her almost nothing. And she had asked him almost no questions. His time away was simply not mentioned. Whether Herta kept it that way out of consideration for him, out of a sense of wariness or caution, which wasn't like her at all, or for tactical reasons, perhaps acting on the advice of that friend Renate she spent so much time talking to on the phone – of which he was well aware, since he wasn't so out of it that he didn't notice such things – didn't make any difference to him. Anyway, he wasn't in the mood to deal with a confrontation.

So he let himself be reassigned the task of mowing the lawn. He suffered from the noise he made doing it, but gritted his teeth and completed his mission. That is to say Herta's mission. And he was rewarded. She fed him on sweet treats and even gave him some attention in bed – no doubt another piece of advice from Renate.

He let it happen. After all, it wasn't unpleasant. Sometimes he was roused to a level of activity that surprised even himself. Herta registered this with every fibre of her being and a growing sense of satisfaction. That is as it should be, she said. You are the man, she said. You are still my husband.

A womanly, even feminine side of her emerged that hadn't done so for many years. Her voice had a different pitch. Sometimes it almost sounded like that of the young Herta he now recalled. The voice of a girl who had just escaped from the ear-boxing regime of an otherwise helpless father, of a young woman who had also received rather rough treatment and allegedly been groped by one of her tutors, a certain Mr Stephan, and who was looking for a man to lean on, one who would put his arm around her and protect her if necessary.

Novak not only had to bring himself to deal with the lawn mower, there was the garden vacuuming too. The garden vacuum was new. They had only bought it at the beginning of October. There had already been one or two around the previous year. But this year they had them on special offer at the DIY store down the road.

That lot knew just what self-respecting people who wanted to keep a bit of order in their gardens needed. The wind was getting stronger and blowing the leaves off the trees. It would go on like that for the rest of the month. You couldn't just leave heaps of leaves lying around on the lawn, or indeed on the tarmac or tiles in the front yard. And to sweep them to one side with a rake as people used to was not only tedious, but given the modern alternatives little short of embarrassing.

So Novak vacuumed up leaves outside in the garden and even on the pavement in front of the garden gate. Meanwhile, inside the house, Herta vacuumed up dust. This produced a double dissonance which at first made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. But little by little he came to hear it almost as a kind of harmony.

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