

BOOKS

Lotta Elstad, *Jeg nekter å tenke (I refuse to think)*, Oslo, Editura Flamme Forlag, 2017, 240 p.

Lotta Elstad is one of Norway's new literary stars, enjoying considerable international attention after her debut in 2008. Elstad (b. 1982) is a writer, journalist, historian and non-fiction editor, a complex figure, standing out through her original contrasting style. Between the few chosen ones for NORLA's talent development programme, *New Voices*, as part of Norway's project as Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2019, Elstad was present with her newest novel, *I Refuse to think*. She had already made her entrance to Europe with her books translated to languages such as English, German or French, and now for the first time, to Romanian as well.

Winner of the Oslo Prize for best novel in 2017, *I refuse to think* is a daring and witty feminist dark comedy, extremely contemporary, written in the author's specific energetic and light, but also sharp satirical style. It is a book of high contrasts, as Lotta Elstad is a master of blending serious themes, such as abortion and politics, with humour, writing at a fresh, energetic pace, while maintaining the intellectual feature of her works through various references

and ingenious subtext. Hence we also encounter traditional timeless literary motifs, such as love, the right to decide for oneself and the attempt to control one's own destiny, typical of Norwegian literature.

The book captivates the reader from the very beginning and transposes them into the main character's existence: "*My name is Hedda Møller. I am thirty-three biblical years old. I've lost my boyfriend (an "erotic friendship"), my job (a verbal contract), and have just survived a plane-crash in the mountains around Sarajevo.*" And the adventure goes on until the last page. On her way back to Oslo, Hedda has a regrettable one-night-stand in Berlin with Milo, a hipster she meets on Tinder, who keeps texting her in CAPS LOCK, and follows her back home, where another surprise awaits: the news of her upcoming unwanted pregnancy. She immediately decides to take an abortion, aiming for a "*quick procedure*", but it turns out that "*the quick procedure was forbidden last year*", and this is thus not possible anymore before officially thinking about it for *three working days* – a rule imposed by the Norwegian Healthcare System, supported by the state. This strong



motif generates the novel's title: "*I refuse to think. I refuse - and it's as hopeless as urging someone not to imagine a zebra. You spend the next hour shaking the striped horse out of your head.*"

The abortion theme is depicted from feminist, but also political perspective, and the source of Lotta's inspiration lies in real life, as in most of her writings. The author was stirred by the problematic abortion law in Poland, one of Europe's most restrictive laws in this sense, and she makes various references to even more prohibitive countries throughout the story, like Texas, Indiana, El Salvador or Saudi Arabia. Moreover, concerns have been raised even in Norway, when the Christian Democratic Party proposed a mandatory reflection time of two days before abortion. Elstad considers this mandatory thinking as a political act and a manipulative strategy, being imposed by authorities, and she raises awareness over the fact that the women's right to decide upon their own lives is threatened. Additionally, another central element to the book is how to make a living in an uncertain and insecure world, addressed especially to the younger generations born with a tricky benefit of freedom and opportunities. Hedda is a well educated freelancer, with no stable income, and little support from the social security welfare system. This motif is however best portrayed in Milo, who, according to Lotta Elstad in an interview for Dagsavisen (<https://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/svart-og-feministisk-komedie-1.995380>), represents a Europe in crisis, living spontaneously from job to job in his caravan, free to go wherever he wants – but this freedom becomes a necessity, he doesn't really have a choice. The contrasts between the characters who share the same final

goal, are illustrated in a vibrant and fascinating way.

The novel strikes as contemporary not only through its very up-to-the-minute themes, but also through Lotta's accurate depictions of reality – *Tinder, Starbucks, Trump, Aloe Vera juice that has a cure for everything* – and modern writing style: "*I want you to get in my bed as often as in my news feed.*" This style has great appeal for young audiences, such as millennials or Generation Y and Z who may easily identify themselves in the book, having been born into times marked by technological achievements, the digital world and endless possibilities. However, the contemporary mark, rich in spontaneity and authenticity, is masterfully combined with intellectualism, which makes the novel exceptional, thus broadening its target audience.

The translated version into Romanian was published this year in September by Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, as part of the Nordic Collection led by Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu, and supported by Norwegian Literature Abroad (NORLA). Translating this novel represented a very special experience for me. As a reader, I couldn't put down the book, as it caught me from the first paragraph, but as a translator, I was challenged by the numerous references and brilliant undertones. The novel is contrasting through its fluent modern writing style and the intellectual remarks that go from feminism to politics, philosophy, literature and culture.

A Feminist direct hit (according to Stavanger Aftenblad), *I refuse to think* is a novel that makes you stop rushing through life, and think. By joining Hedda in her journey through Europe, but also her inward journey, we get to distance ourselves from the social pressure, and open up some gates towards our inner selves.

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