



# Menuet Za Kitaro: Na Petindvajset Strelov

*Vitomil Zupan*

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Taking cues from the wartime epics of Ford Madox Ford and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Vitomil Zupan tells the harrowing story of partisan soldier “Berk” and his surreal experiences as a guerrilla during the Axis occupation of Ljubljana. Running parallel to the jumble of Berk’s wartime experiences is his no less peculiar encounter with an old enemy during a vacation at a Spanish coastal resort. Together, the two men try to make sense of their wartime memories, leading past and future into a *danse macabre* undermining the certainties of each. A document of the horrors and tiny comedies of war, and an exploration of the nature of beauty and morality when subjected to the absurdity of history, *Minuet for Guitar* is an overwhelming literary achievement.

## **Menuet Za Kitaro: Na Petindvajset Strelov Details**

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Author : Vitomil Zupan

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## Matej says

What an exquisite, thought-provoking, wonderfully written novel to throw you into the pits of dark despair and self-loathing for being a part of what we call the apex of evolution - humanity. This read was a displeasure of the highest quality.

Vitomil Zupan is one of the great novelists of Slovene literature that almost no one has read. It puts him right up there with Boris Pahor, Edvard Kocbek and Lojze Kovačič - all great authors of the last 60 years, their books titled "modern Slovene classics", but rarely read by the broader public outside the narrow circle of teachers, cultural workers and literary enthusiasts. There is a reason for that. Their books are so complex no one takes the time to understand them. And once you do, they almost inevitably take you along the route of melancholy, despair and shame. Shame of being a human, a hopelessness when you realise the human nature does not really change and the civilized human society is just a beautiful thin paper wrapped around a pile of dung. It takes very little to tear it and the smell then crushes every positive thought you possess about the human race.

Ok, bleak as my feelings after finishing *Minuet for the guitar* are, the novel is one of the best pieces of text I have ever read. Vitomil Zupan introduces us to Jakob Bergant - Berk, a Slovene WWII resistance fighter placed into and lost in two places and two times. The first is Slovenia during the last three years of World War II and the second is a tourist-drenched Spain of the seventies. Berk during the war is an apolitical individualist without any real understanding of the ideologies mangling each other around him. A brave thinker and doubter with a flapping mouth at a time when thinking, doubting and flapping one's mouth got a person killed, if they didn't have Berk's luck. For him, the war is an environment for growth and competition, not unlike a sport event; it is also a chance for escaping the stifling absence of freedom in the occupied Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital.

Setting foot into the war, Berk is swept along in a current of historical events - resistance against Italians and Germans, the Communist revolution and Slovenian civil war, growing of the Partisan guerrilla rag-tag army into a regular army of formidable strength. But through Berk's eyes these monumental events are invisible, veiled by chaos of war, going back and forth between killing and dying, peaceful moments in villages, heated intellectual debates about ideology that get Berk on the black list of the Communist leaders, sex, moments stretched into years and days lost in cacophony of senseless, chaotic events that propel Berk this way and that, without him knowing why, how and when. Always keep your mouth shut. Don't ask. This is Berk's mantra. To ask questions is to be deemed suspicious. To doubt is to sabotage the revolution. To stick out of the crowd is to advertise capitalist, bourgeois ways of thinking. Be quiet and walk. Walk, on and on. Walking is important. The whole novel is one big travelogue. Berk walks out of Ljubljana and keeps on walking through the whole war, keeps on walking after the war, and thirty years later he is still journeying through Spain, fleeing the war and still living it, carrying with him all his dead comrades, who live and talk through him. One of them is Anton, Berk's antithesis, a veteran of the Spanish civil war, a fighter who has beliefs and a very realistic picture of the world but also has the sense to keep them to himself. A practical man fighting for something and dying for nothing, a senseless death in a shooting accident in a peaceful moment among his own people.

So Berk and all the dead inside him are driven by the memories of war to Spain, where he meets a German tourist, who was an army officer fighting in the same theatre of war as Berk. They talk about the war, they analyse it, scrutinize all its aspects and realize they are the same. Two human beings, two chess pieces, directed by powers of ideologies, hate and stupidity, ripped out of one context and forced into another, one that left them broken and unable to escape. Nevertheless, their similarities are overcome by the basic human

nature - deep at heart they are still enemies; courteous, polite, soft-speaking elderly men, but enemies nonetheless.

And all this barely scratches the surface of all that is Minuit for the guitar. It forces the reader to deal with different concepts every few sentences, all being woven into a complex pattern of taking the world apart and looking carefully at its parts and then putting it all together again. The picture is suddenly much uglier. If I wanted to do the book justice, I would have to write an essay. It's a novel I never want to read again, but I am sure I will, probably more than once. It's one of those texts that reward rereads and as hard as it is to get through it, you are the richer for it. And as young as I am, I am sure, I missed a lot and misunderstood a lot. It was a delightful torture and a subtle rape of my little bubble of a world, created by living in a relative paradise in a time of peace.

Verdict: 10/10

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### **Tuck says**

wonderfully granular epic of slovene resistance to nazis (and their collaborators the "whites", the remnants of Italian fascists [perhaps the most human monsters of wwii?]), and all freedom fighters' good buddies back then, stalin and crew, by one of the most "famous" slovene authors ever. (i guess anyway, i know nothing of Slovenian literature). so at once the reader is immersed in a detailed and compelling day-by-day of slovenian partisans fighting nazis between Ljubljana and Trieste (rough rough country interspersed with beautiful sounding farm lands and forests) and our main character Berk's inner battles to come to terms with war, compassion, and unspeakable violence and terror. a nice pomo touch in that Berk is vacationing in 1970's southwest spain and hanging out with a german veteran of the same war theater, so a believable vehicle for the slovene to reminisce and the german to give contrast. if you are going to read one slovene novel, make it this one, it is a masterpiece. (hah, and about the only one so far in english, but dalkey is trying to rectify that)

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### **Javier de la Peña Ontanaya says**

Berk es un partisano esloveno que sale de un campo de concentración en la Segunda Guerra Mundial y regresa a Ljubljana, que se la disputan la Italia de Mussolini y la Alemania de Hitler.

El protagonista narra sus vivencias como partisano en los montes de Eslovenia como flashbacks 30 años después en unas vacaciones en Mallorca en las que coincide con un soldado de la Wehrmacht que combatió también en Eslovenia.

Una interesante novela histórica sobre Eslovenia de un autor esloveno, algo no muy usual. Es interesante como narra el día a día que el mismo Zupan vivió como partisano, las dificultades de su estilo de vida, el combate al opresor que ocupa su tierra y sus objetivos. Sin embargo el relato cae en algo de monotonía, entre combates, táctica y los affaires sexuales de Berk con algunas de las lugareñas.

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### **Dario says**

Vrlo je važno do?i na brežuljak... ;)

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## Natalija says

Dosadnjikavo i mizogino.

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## Tony says

(This review may contain some innocuous spoilers.)

*Es lo mismo, es lo mismo, Señor .*

It's all the same. It's all the same, Sir. *Whether Cain slew Abel, or Abel Cain.*

The voice of this book is the Slovenian partisan 'Berk'. He has fought the Germans, the Italians, the Ustaše. He was wary of his own leaders, with good reason. They certainly didn't trust him. Not because he was a coward. No one could question his bravery. Yet he would not join the Party. Perhaps it was only Anton, who fought at his side, who understood.

There is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing in this book. Such is the life of a partisan. Zupan takes us into the mud and blood: lice supping on an open wound; the sourness of wine; the stolen reprieve of a cigarette, more paper than tobacco; a cossack hat to warm the feet; urine to cleanse a wound; a sexual union between people months away from a proper bath.

Yet, a reader may wonder: what's the point? There's lots of WWII fiction out there. Why was this book finally translated just now when it was written in 1973?

There's a literary device employed here that I don't think I've seen before. The story of Berk in the Second World War would be sloughing along - that endless to-ing and fro-ing I mentioned - with no apparent end to WWII in sight, and then, with no warning, not so much as an asterisk or a page break, Berk would be in Spain, in the 1970s, talking to Joseph Bitter, a former German officer. One paragraph, a firefight outside Ljubljana, the very next paragraph, a pleasant conversation at a hacienda.

Reading this, I assumed there must be some connection. That Berk knew Bitter during the War, perhaps observed some atrocity, and now was prepared to seek revenge. It's a novel, right?

But no. That wasn't it at all. And that's almost the point. They were the same, you see. Just two men. *Es lo mismo, es lo mismo, Señor .*

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*How little I knew of my surroundings. And how little I knew of the planet I lived on. Far off in the primeval forests, life followed its usual course, nature's struggle for existence. Out in the ocean, plankton flow into the maw of the swimming whale. Air raids on cities and railway junctions. Convoys torpedoed by submarines. Sandstorms whip the English and German tanks as they exchange cannon fire. In a park laid waste, the birds*

*still sing. Soldiers fall in a hail of machine-gun bullets. Others go on leave and the birth rate soars. Telephones, telegraphs, communication networks, radio stations. Cries of the wounded. Community singing. White icy mountains in the faint Arctic sunshine. A desert oasis. Horsemen in the savannah. Raucous voices of the victors. Roadblocks. Concentration camps hidden from the public view. The notes of a guitar. Songbird dead in trap. Hand grenades. Bulletproof waistcoats. Washerwoman on a riverbank. Factories. Roads. Rain on a hill farm. Someone praying in a dark, empty church. An abandoned child dying of hunger in the cradle. All at the same moment.*

Let me repeat: *The notes of a guitar*. Because, that's why I wanted to read this in the first place: the great title. And there's music here, hidden sometimes in the reality of war. The *Minuet* is a real one, one I had never heard before, Fernando Sor's *Minuet for Guitar in A major*. Here, take a listen:

[https://fandalism.com/terrysebastian/...](https://fandalism.com/terrysebastian/)

I mean, how could you *not* read a book whose title was inspired by that two minutes?

Those notes are reprised often, as is the theme:

*An insect has no ideology, the poor thing could not distinguish a swastika from a five-pointed star. An insect could not be expected to know some Germans were more for Hitler and others less so. He would not know that the Liberation Front was composed of various groups, that party members, left-wing Sokols, and intellectuals were here deployed below him. Perhaps he could only distinguish the dead and the living. He would not know that while insects die and stay dead, people do not want to die and stay dead but to go on living, roam the world, go sailing. Furthermore, they are sometimes violent. They wake you up in the middle of the night, prop you up on your elbows, and drag you out of bed, just to accompany them to that all-night restaurant, the Cuevas Ca'n Morey, where the band plays till dawn.*

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At one point, Bitter asks Berk ('politely' no less): *Somewhere at bottom we have remained enemies, haven't we?*

In time, Berk says this: *If it's true that every seven years all the cells in the human body are replaced, we've already had four complete metamorphoses since the war, and we still fundamentally don't know what really happened then. One side won, the other side lost, but that's not the whole story. You know, the war never really ended, did it? I'm not only thinking now about the wars in the Pacific, in Korea, in Vietnam, in the Middle East. I'm not only thinking about the Cold War, smoldering all the time and ready at any moment to flare up into the worst conflagration. The war lives on and continues to thrive in each of us, renewing itself all the time, ready to flare at any moment. We're not prepared to accept the world as it is; and in this we are fully justified. Old wars are constantly begetting new ones, whether we like it or not, and meanwhile, we have absolutely no idea what has happened and what is happening, till one fine day we find ourselves part of an armed multitude, breathing hellfire and locked in a life-and-death combat. At heart, we are still old enemies, as you said, but we have also bred a new enmity. We have lost our allegiance to our old armies, but in some mysterious way we belong to the armies of the future, even though we have watched the degeneration of our ideals, even though our rosy spectacles are smashed, and we should logically stand aside as embittered witnesses of events.*

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We are all the same, Señor, even if we're not. There is much to ponder here.

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### **Primoz says**

It's an interesting book and truly thought provoking at times, yet I found myself bored during a substantial portion of it, and I like my novels to lead somewhere, to arrive at something, rather than simply end in a clichéd modernistic aporia. Very interesting look at the life of the partisans, though.

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### **Marcus says**

Excellent story of survival. An example of 20th Century Slovenian literature.  
Worthy read!

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### **Larry says**

Minuet for Guitar - I'm reading the English Translation.

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### **Jonathan says**

'crime and punishment' for WWII.

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