

Svjetlana Sumpor
Independent scholar, Zagreb
svjsumpor@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-6503-7312

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Human Attitudes to Nature in Four Stories from *The Decameron 2020*

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The Decameron 2020 started in Croatia as an online literary event in the time of the first quarantine caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and resulted in an e-book of fifty-two selected short stories. Its initiators and editors, Ana Cerovac, Vesna Kurilić and Antonija Mežnarić, recognized the peculiarity of the experience of living in the end times, as well as the potential for comparison of the e-book with Boccaccio's classic, and set up an online space where authors from Croatia and the region could (re)create or transform their experiences, or reflect upon them. This paper focuses on four stories from the collection in which nature is given special significance: *Algernonova osveta* (Algernon's Revenge) by Nataša Milić, *Zaražena* (Infected) by Sunčica Mamula, *Redukcije* (Reductions) by Ana Kutleša and *2030* by Radmila Rakas. It investigates the range of feelings and attitudes towards nature in the time of pandemic and quarantine, as reflected in these four stories.

KEYWORDS: *The Decameron 2020*; intertextuality; ecocriticism; pandemic; motif of nature in literature

1. Introduction

The paper will analyse four stories from the collection of fifty-two published as an e-book entitled *Decameron 2020: Priče iz karantene* (The Decameron 2020: Stories from the Quarantine) in 2020. The aim of the paper is to discuss attitudes to nature during or after a pandemic, as imagined and presented in this particular piece of contemporary literature from Croatia. The stories selected for analysis are: *Algernonova osveta* (Algernon's Revenge) by Nataša Milić; *Zaražena* (Infected) by Sunčica Mamula; *Redukcije* (Reductions) by Ana Kutleša; and *2030* by Radmila Rakas.

Firstly, numerous intertextual links of the e-book with other literary works as well as with various cultural texts will be pointed out, thus providing a reference frame for interpretation.

After that, the stories selected will be analysed according to the main topic in relation to the nature they are discussing. They will be grouped according to three topics: treatment of animals, nature as a cure, utopian moments.

In conclusion, the paper will point out which psychological conditions and emotions, provoked by the experience of living in the time of a pandemic and mediated through the motif of relation with nature, are represented and explored in these four stories.

2. Intertextual links

The Decameron 2020 started as an online literary event in the time of the first lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and resulted in an e-book of fifty-two selected short stories. Its initiators and editorial team—Ana Cerovac, Vesna Kurilić and Antonija Mežnarić—recognized the peculiarity of the experience of living in the end times, as well as the potential for comparison of the e-book with Giovanni Boccaccio's classic, and set up an online space where authors from Croatia and the region, in the period between March 15th and May 15th 2020, were invited to post previously unpublished stories. The stories had to be written either in Croatian or in some other language from the region that does not need to be translated in order to be understandable to Croa-

tian-speaking readers. Each story had either to be set in Croatia and its vicinity, or to express the identity of Croatia or some other country from the region by some other means. As explicitly stated by the editorial team, the project was “created as a reaction to the sudden closing down of cultural events and the subsequent lockdown in Croatia” and it was



Fig. 1. *Decameron 2020: Priče iz karantene*. (2020) Ed. Ana Cerovac, Vesna Kurilić and Antonija Mežnarić. <https://decameron2020price.wordpress.com/e-zbirka/> Illustration from the web site (5.12.2021)

“inspired by Boccaccio’s legendary work” (Cerovac, Kurilić, Mežnarić, in: *Decameron 2020: Priče iz karantene*, 2020). The e-book comprises stories both by renowned and previously unknown authors. Each of the fifty-two stories is written by a different author; therefore, they vary very much in style and in writing skills. They are of different lengths

and tackle different themes. They are all testimonies to the preoccupations of people who were living at the specific historical moment and in the specific region, although not all of them are directly concerned with the pandemic, quarantine or nature.

Apart from the reference present in the title, *The Decameron 2020* shares with Boccaccio's work the idea of passing the time during quarantine in story-telling, as well as the sense of the peculiar experience of witnessing a catastrophe that threatens the survival of the human race on Earth. However, by the very fact that while facing the current catastrophe, the contemporary pandemic, we are reminded of a previous catastrophe, of the plague that eventually passed, the idea of the repetitiveness of history is introduced. Acknowledging that a narrative about facing the end is not the final narrative about ending, but one among many, gives rise to a consoling idea of cyclical time—of time which is in tune with cycles apparent in natural world. Therefore, a narrative about “the end of history” is replaced with a narrative about “the end times” (Žižek, 2010; Latour, 2017, 184–219).

The appalling images of piled-up corpses, makeshift burials, forgone burial rites, the diseased bereft of the consolation of their families and public mourning made impossible described by Boccaccio (2018, 7–12) find uncanny parallels in our time, as discussed by numerous scholars (Butler, Yancy, 2020; Marcus, 2020). Fortunately, the heroic venture of Boccaccio's aristocratic characters, the narrators of *The Decameron*, to preserve social ties, interpersonal bonds and the discipline of civilized life, which forms “a fire-wall against the social ruin” (Marcus, 2020) also has resonances in our time.

The Decameron 2020 is not the sole example of a recent project inspired by Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. A concept proposed by novelist Rivka Galchen to the editors of the *New York Times Magazine* resulted in the book *The Decameron Project: 29 New Stories from the Pandemic*, with the contributions of twenty-nine contemporary writers, specifically commissioned for the work (Power, 2020). The *San Diego Decameron Project*, organized by the San Diego Public Library, San Diego Writers, Ink, Write Out Loud, and the La Jolla Historical Society, invited local authors to submit their previously unpublished works, and one hundred stories were selected for publication (*The San Diego Decameron Project*, 2021).

The intertextual links of *The Decameron 2020* are not limited to Boccaccio only. At the launch of the project, the editorial team proposed ten topics to its would-be-contributors, the majority of which are obvious paraphrases of or allusions to other texts. The topic *U svemiru, nitko ne čuje kad kašlješ* (In Space, No One Can Hear You Cough), inviting “stories about isolation,” is an obvious reference to the famous tagline of the SF/horror film *Alien* (1979), directed by Ridley Scott: “In space, no one can hear you scream.” The topic *Vrli novi svijet* (Brave New World), calling for “stories about a world we don’t recognize anymore,” borrows its title from Aldous Huxley’s famous dystopian novel of 1932. *Ljubav u doba korone* (Love in the Time of Corona) is a playful transposition of the title of the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) by Gabriel García Márquez, meant to cover “love stories during the epidemic.” *Vidanje i vidarsko prigovaranje* (Healing and the healer’s talk), inviting “stories about magical illnesses and healings,” in the Croatian original is a play on the title of the classic work of Croatian Renaissance poet Petar Hektorović, *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* (Fishing and Fishermen’s Talk). The topic *Junaci našeg doba* (Heroes of Our Time) called for “stories about solidarity,” while by its title alluding to the novel *A Hero of Our Time* (in fact, a story about a nihilistic, cynical type of “hero”) by the Russian Romantic writer Mikhail Lermontov. *Ljudska komedija* (The Human Comedy), while borrowing its title from the French Realist novelist Honoré de Balzac, called for “humorous stories about toilet paper and other adversities.” *Deset malih epidemiologa* (Ten Little Epidemiologists), an allusion to Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Niggers* (1939),¹ is a topic that invited “crime stories to help our little grey cells get some exercise in lockdown.” *Kuća tame* (House of Darkness) called for “horror stories to scare us in isolation.” *Život je san* (Life is a Dream), borrowing the title from Spanish Baroque dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca, invited “stories about utopias and the world we want to see after the lockdown.”²

1 The Agatha Christie’s book was later renamed *Ten Little Indians*, and then later again *And Then There Was None*.

2 The editorial team also proposed *Povijesne pošasti* (Historic Plagues) as the tenth topic, but none of the fifty-two stories selected for the e-book was grouped under that topic.

It can be observed that, by introducing such rich intertextuality through the various topics, the editorial team not only called for various genres and modes of stories, but also added to the virtual dimension of the project, inviting literary communication of the authors across time and space.

3. Treatment of animals

The relationship of humans and animals is one of the basic *topoi* of ecocritical literature, a subject much discussed by ecocritical writers. Thus, it is often emphasised that suffering from the ills of another species is a typical condition of the Anthropocene, for humans and nonhumans alike. This suffering is a matter not just of empathy but also of material interdependence. People are intertwined with other species; they cannot live without them. Twenty-first-century research on organisms ranging from bacteria to insects to mammals has shown that symbiosis is a near-requirement for life—even for *Homo sapiens* (Swanson, Tsing, Bubandt, Gan, in: Tsing et al., 2017, M4-M5). In the urgent times called the Anthropocene, the arts for living on a damaged planet demand *sympoietic* thinking and action (Haraway, in: Tsing et al., 2017, M31).

Pramod K. Nayar uses the term *ecoprecarity* for the “intertwined set of discourses of fragility, vulnerability, power relations across species and imminent extinction” (Nayar, 2019, 6), as he sets out to examine the relationship between and among human and other life/non-life forms, as well as the state of precarious lives and the *ecoprecarious* imaginary, which in his opinion emerges somewhere between the “speculative and the real, the risk, the hazard, and the catastrophe” (Nayar, 2019, 8).

In *The Decameron 2020*, a story that introduces the theme of human mistreatment of animals, and the catastrophic impact that it might have on humankind’s existence, is *Algernonova osveta*, written by Nataša Milić and part of the *In space, no one can hear you cough* topic. The very title of the story makes an intertextual allusion to the short SF story *Flowers for Algernon* (1959), written by Daniel Keyes, and to one of its characters, the laboratory mouse called Algernon.

Nataša Milić's story is also of the science-fiction genre. It takes place in the future, when people have been exiled from Earth and set up colonies in space, and interstellar travelling by private spaceship is a common type of transport. The narrator, Teodora Leto, stricken with the lethal flu strain R-2084,³ transmitted from mice to people, is desperately travelling from one human space colony to another, trying to get permission to land, but, as her illness is always betrayed by her cough, she can never succeed. Finally, as her last hope, she tries her luck with the unpopular colony Atlantida, informally called Balkanija, only to find out that in the end she has arrived exactly where all the misfortune had begun. Namely, on Balkanija, a laboratory mouse, Algernon, was experimented on for the cure of flu and then, as *almost* recovered (that is, still contagious), he was sent back to Earth. Teodora learns that the scientists who experimented on the mouse thought they had found the cure and that they had done a big favour to humankind, while in fact they caused the spread of the R-2084 flu and the destruction of all life on Earth. Algernon is transformed from the victim of people's experiments into the ultimate means of people's destruction. The ironic turn at the end therefore invites readers to understand the story and its title as a sort of a re-establishment of balance: a species which had suffered destruction for a long time has "turned the tables" and taken revenge on its persecutors. The story critically tackles the speciesist stereotype of mice and rats as "vermin"—much despised dirty animals that spread diseases—showing that the virus was transferred to them by humans in the first place.

Algernon, therefore, represents all those countless laboratory animals whose lives were sacrificed—without their choice or consent—for scientific progress and for the benefit of the human race.⁴ In Nataša

3 "R," as explained by Teodora, stands for "rat," while "2084" is an allusion to dystopian, Orwellian 1984 and respiratory, flu-like symptoms an allusion to Covid-19.

4 According to statistics collected by the organizations fighting for animal rights, each year more than 100 million animals—including mice, rats, frogs, dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, monkeys, fish, and birds—are killed in U.S. laboratories for biology lessons, medical training, curiosity-driven experimentation, and chemical, drug, food, and cosmetics testing (PETA, 2021) (<https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-experimentation/animals-used-experimentation-factsheets/>

Milić's story, Algernon does not get to choose to be subject to experiments on Balkanija, nor to be sent to Earth *almost* recovered. Anyway, although he was treated and used just as a means to others' ends, his character is endowed with a supposed motivation of his own: revenge.

Anthropomorphism, defined as ascribing human attributes to animals (Garrard, 2004, 137) was denounced by Friedrich Nietzsche, who observed that no human aesthetic and moral judgments can be rightly applied to non-human beings (Nietzsche, cited in: Garrard, 2004, 90). As formulated by Pramod K. Nayar, the wild is a blank slate on which humans inscribe their values, making animal behaviour analogous to that of humans. Humans imagine and interpret wild creatures from within their own cultural frames of reference (Nayar, 2019, 104).

Diseases seen as “the revenge” of laboratory animals, or ecological catastrophes seen as “Nature’s backlash” after a long period of suffering abuse, are nothing but humans’ projections of their own emotions of fear and guilt. Nobody is “taking revenge” on them; they are just learning the hard way about the fact that on Earth everything is interconnected and that in nature everything circulates. As the saying goes, “what goes around, comes around.”

It is also worth noticing that Algernon was sent to Earth from Balkanija, a particularly unpopular space colony with a bad reputation, described as “black hole” and “the last refuge of internationally sought thieves, suspect persons and disobedient people of all sorts” (Milić, in: *Decameron 2020: Priče iz karantene*, 2020). An obvious allusion to the countries of the Balkans—because of its name and the fact that a majority of

animal-experiments-overview/ [15.11.2021]). Moreover, only vertebrate animals and some invertebrates such as octopuses are defined as ‘animals’ by the European legislation governing animal experiments. Shockingly, in the USA rats, mice, fish, amphibians and birds are not defined as animals under animal experiment regulations. That means no legal permission to experiment on them is needed and they are not even included in any statistics (*Cruelty Free International*, 2021) (<https://www.crueltyfreeinternational.org/why-we-do-it/about-animal-testing> [15.11.2021]). The argument of the advocates of animal research is that the use of animals in some forms of biomedical research remains essential to the discovery of the causes, diagnoses, and treatment of disease and suffering in humans and animals. The obligatory “3 Rs”—refining, reducing and replacing animals in research whenever possible—are claimed to be a standard procedure (*Stanford Medicine*, 2021) (<https://med.stanford.edu/animalresearch/why-animal-research.html> [15.11.2021]).

its citizens, though not exclusively, came from there—it serves as a reminder that humans are constantly in search for an *inferior Other*—be it an animal, different race, nationality etc.—onto which they can then project the characteristics they dislike. The proximity of the despised Balkanija and such a widely despised animal as a mouse brings us close to *theriomorphism*, the reverse of anthropomorphism, which is often used in the contexts of national or racial stereotyping (Garrard, 2004, 141). Like mice, which are often seen as “vermin,” adverse and potentially harmful animals, people from the Balkans are considered to be morally inferior troublemakers. Sadly, the characters from the Balkans (Teodora and an officer) identify themselves with that image.

4. Nature as a cure

The aristocratic youth, who are the narrators in Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, take refuge from the ills of the plague-stricken city by fleeing to the countryside. The pleasures that rich, cultivated nature and a well-tended garden offer them are described in detail (Boccaccio, 2018, 120–121).

In the time of Covid-19, and particularly in the time of the first lockdown, many people rediscovered the value of being outdoors and in contact with nature. Either because simple activities such as taking a walk—in normal, pre-Covid-19 times taken for granted—became discouraged and therefore started to be seen as a privilege, or because a sudden halt of all non-essential human activity made nature more visible in the cities, making it seem to be slowly recovering from the pollution brought about by industrialization (*The Guardian*, 2020), thanks to the reduction of the human carbon footprint on the Earth (Diffenbaugh et al., 2020).

In his ecocritical writings, Pramod K. Nayar emphasises a dichotomy of the cityscape, as the architectural uncanny, scene and spectacle of waste, and the wild, as the space of self-discovery, healing and escape (Nayar, 2019, 13). The story *Zaražena* by Sunčica Mamula, belonging to the topic *Healing and healer’s talk* of *The Decameron 2020*, exemplifies this dichotomy. It narrates the adventures of a female, unnamed protagonist who is trying to get out of the city and into the forest to gather asparagus

and herbs. Since the city is closed down because of the Covid-19 pandemic, she is having trouble getting a pass in a legal way, so she turns to forging one.

The story is set in a distinctly dystopian frame: motifs such as nature and liberty situated outside the city walls, “Decree of the Changed Ones”⁵ and “Tax on Health”⁶ as methods of segregating and controlling the citizens, special “passes” required for leaving the city and the poor selection of food⁷ serve as indicators of severe restrictions and loss of freedom.

Restriction of personal freedoms in dystopias is often mirrored in the appearance of their cities/states/camps, which are strictly demarcated from their surroundings, while trespassing between the two is forbidden. Furthermore, the closed character of a dystopian society is expressed in architectural barriers (such as “green wall,” “dome,” “net,” etc.) while the desire for freedom often finds its expression in the form of the protagonist’s “escape” to the forbidden territory (Ајдачић, 1999, 93).

The motif of civil disobedience, as a strategy that a protagonist turns to in order to fulfil their personal desires which are in conflict with the imposed rules is also highly indicative of the genre of dystopia. And so are the typical characters of an ill-adapted, disobedient individual and the representatives of the governing regime, preference of individual freedoms to the collective consensus and the attitude of encouraging disobedience. There is a contrast between the typical setting of utopia—idealized surroundings in harmony with nature—and the typical dystopian artificial surroundings (Sumpor, 2021, 89). The wild represents the space of self-discovery, healing and escape (Nayar, 2019, 94) and a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city (Garrard, 2004, 59).

5 “Decree of the Changed Ones” states that a person who deliberately, by keeping an unhealthy diet, endangers his/her own health and immunity, thus increasing his/her chances to get ill, and indirectly also endangers other citizens and the whole healthcare system of which he/she is a part of, should pay a proportional price for it. “Movement of the Changed Ones” started as an incentive to people to reform and make changes for their own benefit and that of others, but ended in establishing a new class whose only interests are control and power.

6 Chocolate biscuits and potato chips with onion, cream or pizza flavour are luxury items, affordable to a few, because of the “Tax on Health.”

7 Due to a decline in production, the choice of food has diminished.

The story *Zaražena* explores oppositions of official authority vs. private desire; artificial regulations and order vs. natural disorder; police procedures (checking documents, interrogation, official salutations) vs. rituals of Mother Nature (having arrived in the forest, the protagonist makes offerings, expresses her gratitude, and connects with her animal nature by “rolling in the meadows like a cat.”) The symbolism of Nature as Mother is present in the description of the protagonist’s interaction with nature, which abounds with motifs like “plants,” “juices,” “scent,” “nourishment,” which all together signify life-giving forces.

Symbols and depictions of Earth as a nurturer have been long present in human societies. Various civilizations have harvest rites in order to honour the Earth, which have not only ecological and economic but also psychological benefits. By recreating with symbols and re-enactments fantasies of immortality and reunion with “the First Object” and “the Territory of Ultimate Gratifications,” people create a psychic phenomenon that comforts them. Attachment to a place, to a scenery, to a soil that has nurtured generations, contributes to a sense of safety and to psychological stability. The need for a locus to draw on is vital to human existence (Konare, 2011). In a way, both Earth and the mother represent “the First Object” of attachment; the mother for an individual, Earth for all mankind; they are both “the Territory of Ultimate Gratification” because they at first take care of all our needs and because we can separate from them only gradually and in part; both are in a way our link to the life cycle.

However, nature encompasses both health and danger. After spending a glorious day in the wild, the protagonist of the story *Zaražena* becomes seriously unwell and ends up in hospital, fighting for her life. The end of the story brings about an unexpected and ironic turn, as we find out that the protagonist has been infected by two different viruses, and that the virus transferred from a tick picked up in nature has helped her to develop antibodies against the Covid-19 virus and therefore to survive.

5. Utopian moments

It is interesting to notice that *The Decameron 2020*, while starting with the story that offers perhaps the darkest projection of human future—*Algernonova osveta*, where the human race is wiped off the surface of the Earth by a virus—ends with two stories offering utopian imagery and projections of reforming life on Earth: *Redukcije* by Ana Kutleša and 2030 by Radmila Rakas; both exemplify the topic *Life is a dream*. By contrasting such a beginning with this kind of ending, the whole project is given an optimistic tone. The topic, as devised by the editorial team, invited “stories about utopias and the world we want to see after the lockdown.” However, none of these stories mentions lockdown or the Covid-19 pandemic; in their envisioning of what life could look like after the lockdown they go much further than just imagining a return to the “old normal.”

The short story *Redukcije* by Ana Kutleša narrates the banal experience of having difficulties preserving food in a freezer caused by electricity cuts during summer holidays spent on a Croatian island. The banality is transcended by an unexpected enlightening, utopian, moment when all residents of the island start offering their surplus of food to others, therefore choosing to share the food rather than throw it away. Since there is no electricity, people’s activities adapt to the availability of natural sources of light (sunlight, moonlight). Also, the type of their entertainment changes: from the reliance on television and the internet to practicing more in-person communication. Sharing replaces providing only for oneself, enjoying the present replaces worrying about the future, and tuning in with natural cycles replaces human dependence on electrical devices. The story refers to contemporary people’s alienation from nature and, although it does not present the totality of a utopian society, it does present a truly utopian moment, when a crucial change in human attitudes towards the world comes about. It points out that nature provides enough resources for people to live a life of quality, provided that these resources are used with more modesty and distributed with more care.

The story 2030 by Radmila Rakas is a fully-fledged example of the genre of utopia. A reader is given a sort of “a guided tour” of the organization of life and society in the year 2030 by the narrator’s comparison of

“the present” living conditions (of the year 2030) with those he remembers from his childhood (from about ten years ago; that is, from the year 2020). We learn that all the ecological measures for saving the planet that people have been talking about for decades have finally been put into practice. Humans have succeeded in reducing their carbon footprint on Earth. Everybody is using free bicycles instead of cars; everybody is recycling, exchanging and sharing; instead of drilling for oil, the new big business takes care of bees; gardening is in, plastic and commercials are out; the pressure to consume and buy new things has disappeared; there is Empathy Day every week; people have become healthier, etc.

Therefore, two utopian stories of *The Decameron 2020* are not utopian in the sense that they have pretensions to present an “ideal” or “perfect” society. Instead, they are utopian in the sense that they present what the implementation of a much-needed change in human attitudes to Earth would look like. Instead of focusing on the structure and organization of a society as in a traditional utopia, they are focusing on the relationship of humanity and Earth, or on ecological issues, as is indeed appropriate in the Anthropocene. Ideas of sustainability, ecology and sharing are given special prominence.

Thus, the discourse of *ecoprearity* is not necessarily about disaster alone, it can also be about imagining different and alternative futures (Kember, as cited in: Nayar, 2019, 10). It can also be informed by the concept of *not-yet*, the basic concept of Ernst Bloch’s thought (Bloch, 1988), or by what theoreticians consider the principal energy of utopia: hope (Vieira, 2010, 6).

6. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine and lockdown it caused have reminded many authors of the way the plague was described and dealt with in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. As a result, many projects inspired by the pandemic and following Boccaccio’s example were started and in Croatia *The Decameron 2020* was one of them. Contemporary writers shared with Boccaccio the experiences of facing a catastrophe and of living in “the end times.” However, their historical contexts

were different, one of the biggest differences being perhaps the awareness of the urgent state Earth is faced with today.

The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced the term “new normal” into the public discourse, referring to the forced change of personal habits and daily routines, as well as to the social, psychological and economic impact of the pandemic on the society. It has also forced the slowing down of production and a decrease in the use of transportation, which actually helped reducing the human carbon footprint on Earth and increased public awareness about human impact on the environment. Also, the pandemic from its start stimulated various speculations as to the origin of the virus, whether it had been transmitted from animals to humans or had been created by humans in a laboratory.

In Boccaccio's *The Decameron* nature is present mainly in descriptions of the picturesque scenery in which the narrators tell their stories, while the stories themselves are focused on human relations and interactions with one another. In *The Decameron 2020*, in the few stories in which they are present, the motifs of nature function as a pretext to reflect on human attitudes to nature. The lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic stimulated writers not only to make accounts of how their daily life had changed, but also to think about the different aspects of the human relationship with nature, as well as to imagine different scenarios of what could come next.

Two stories in *The Decameron 2020* explore human relations with other species and organisms, demonstrating their interdependency: in *Algernonova osveta* it is the relation with mice, a species considered inferior to people, “vermin”; in *Zaražena*, it is the relation with viruses, which usually in the Anthropocentric view are hardly even perceived as (living) organisms. The motif of abused animals (laboratory mice) is a synecdoche for nature and the way it has been treated by humans. The fear of the revenge of mistreated nature actually stems from the guilt that humankind feels as it becomes more and more aware of the terrible consequences of its own actions. As everything on Earth is interconnected, whatever people do to animals, or to nature in general, eventually catches up with them. On the other hand, if nature is met with respect and confidence instead of will for domination, it can offer a remarkable abundance of resources and even cures, as suggested by the story *Zaražena*.

The Covid-19 pandemic as a global event has inspired in contemporaries a strong feeling of being witness to some kind of catastrophe after which nothing will be the same. As imagined by the authors of the four stories analysed, a change might manifest itself either as the absolute destruction of the world, or its radical reformation, or as the gradually worsening conditions of life in a more and more dystopian reality.

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- **SVJETLANA SUMPOR**—interdisciplinary scholar, curator and critic. She has a degree in art history and comparative literature and a PhD in literature, performative studies, film and culture. She is the author of several books, the latest of which is *Ironijske strategije distopije* (Ironical Strategies of Dystopia). She works as a curator, while pursuing her interests in dystopian studies as an independent scholar.