

Author: Fabiano Alborghetti
Title in Italian: <i>Maiser</i>
Working Title: <i>Maiser the Corn Man</i>
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This extraordinary novel in 70 free-verse stanzas by the Swiss Italian poet Fabiano Alborghetti defies every definition of genre: part *Poor Richard's Almanack* part *Spoon River*, part epic part introspection, but so much more besides. Most importantly, however it tells a compelling story — as a novel must — which is as heart-wrenching and life-affirming as nature itself, and makes you hold your breath right to the very end. It is the story of “An ordinary man, Bruno, like others perhaps/handsome, too. His beginning is here and/now: the collective history of an ordinary man/in post-war years of famine/and fatigue.”

With a poet’s sleight of hand, one man’s story is transformed into a social history of the thankless toil of immigrant Italian sharecroppers, who moved to Canton Ticino after the war and met with harsher conditions than they had left behind, exacerbated by social isolation and stigma, expressed in the insult “Corn Man.”

At the same time, however, the novel in free verse is a glorious celebration of humanity against all odds, of the generosity of the land even when there are too many mouths to feed, of the colors and chiaroscuros of the passing seasons, of everyday implements and their almost miraculous applications, of the sounds and smells of the countryside and of the blood, sweat and tears poured there for generations.

It is no chance that the novel has been dramatized for Italian Swiss Radio (RSI, Rete Due). The pace of the poetry and the driving force of the story

transports us to another dimension in time, space, and literary intensity.

Numerous reviews in the Swiss and Italian press, including *Corriere della Sera* and *Avvenire*, in Italy and *Corriere del Ticino* and *Il Giornale del Popolo* in Switzerland, have acclaimed the book as a literary monument to Italian emigrants.

Maiser won Pro Helvetia Literary Funding and on publication was awarded the most prestigious literary prize in the entire Confederation: the 2018 Swiss Literature Prize. Alborghetti was the recipient of the UBS Culture 2020 Foundation Prize and the Landis & Gyr 2020 Foundation Grant.

Maiser was among the "Six Unmissable Swiss Books" to be translated for Pro Helvetia (the Swiss Ministry of Culture) and was included in the “CH Series” of the CH Foundation for Confederal Collaboration, which promotes the translation of selected Swiss works into the other languages of the Confederation. *Maiser* has been translated into German (Limmat Verlag, Zurich, tr. Maja Pflug, October 2020); the French translation is underway (Editions d’en bas, Lausanne, tr. Christophe Mileschi).

Fabiano Alborghetti is a leading intellectual in Italian Switzerland and one of its foremost poets. He is President of the *Casa della Letteratura per la Svizzera italiana*. (www.fabianoalborghetti.ch)

Clarissa Botsford is a literary translator (www.clarissabotsford.com)

Pro Helvetia has undertaken to fully fund the English translation of this remarkable work.

**Sample Translation of Maiser the Corn Man
Part One, Stanza I, 1948-1952**

An ordinary man, Bruno, like others perhaps,
handsome, too. His beginning is here and
now: the collective history of an ordinary man
in post-war years of famine

and fatigue.

A numerous family
like others at the time
Bruno the middle boy of eight
First Teresa Fedele Aurelio and Vittoria
then Nerio Nerina and baby Urbano.
Margherita his mother
a name like a trodden field daisy
His father, Zefferino,
a breeze of a name for a tyrant.
Born before the century turned
just in time to fight the Great War
holed up on a karst outcrop
or so they said when he returned
in one piece
a man you need permission to speak to
whom you only address with respect
Frugal figures
forged from back breaking and blisters
living hand to mouth off the land
sharecropping wheat vines animals
the sky weighing the land giving
thick skin nails fingers
the day's sweat rinsed off in a chipped tub
a glimmer of light on the mystery
that is a body, donning the same clothes
again, the next day and the next for months.
A reminder of the struggle
stench and sweat
of skin branded by fire
the rough hue of exposed pigment
now burnt now bled dry or cracked
and those hands
massacred by tools, by callouses and toil
by the landowner's demands or the season's,
the many seasons,
mean, incessant and always severe.
Lashing limbs advancing step by step
scythe in hand
harvesting the vibrantly ripe grain
that has grown into gold,
a scratchy scorching patchwork
lovingly stitched each year

hollering from bushel to bushel
on hearing the church bell strike
midday, remembering the hunger.

Then

in the shade of a meal
no talking, mouths full
eyes down digging into the mess tin
cornmeal chestnuts and wedges of cheese
dry bread soaked in wine
best with a hard crust to keep your teeth strong.
Sitting quietly in the shade
relieved your punishment is paid
a nap to while away the hottest hours
the relentless rays sapping your strength
until you are spent.

You sleep

snagged in the grass, hours serenaded
by the screeching of cicadas.

Born again

but it's back to work
as long as there's light until the light changes
stipples stretches and sets
a pink-red shimmering aslant
casting soft shadows returning from the fields
tools on shoulders the dogs running ahead
animal pleasure sniffing and zigzagging
over the crest, picking up
dry sticks in the ditches
to store as kindling for the fire.
The village a silhouette, like blackened rock
a levigated sky with no sign of rain.

Mezzopicchio is right there

The same old house: for generations
its bowels bathed in sunlight
warming the walls, olive trees, yard animals
measuring in steps the spans of the chicken coop.
Then it's time for dinner,
In the last of the light with no lamps on
to scrimp and save, at best there's a flicker
from the fireplace in the kitchen, the pot
hanging indolently from a chain
an economy of gestures
a glowing rosary of sparks and embers.

The family gathers

crowded together
hale and hearty the pack of them, looking alike
despite the extremes, despite their
extreme tiredness.
In the air the smell of boiled bone broth
cornmeal reheated in yesterday's grease.
Our Father thank you for the food on our table

with Amen heralding the breaking of bread
Later as they smoke narrow strips of tobacco
the air becomes thick
the densest clouds dissolve in the dying embers.
Then everything goes quiet.