<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/29/books/review/foreign-fiction-ambai-martin-michael-driessen-hiroko-oyamada-quim-monzo.html>

**THE SHORTLIST**

Not Lost in Translation: Provocative Foreign Fiction

**THE PELICAN**
By Martin Michael Driessen
Translated by Jonathan Reeder
228 pp. Amazon Crossing. $19.95.

Editors’ Picks

Josip and Andrej are insignificant men in an insignificant coastal town in 1980s Yugoslavia who form an improbable relationship as each other’s blackmailer in this funny, serious, clever novel by a Dutch writer and director. Andrej, a postman who reads other people’s mail, starts extorting Josip over his affair with a woman from Zagreb. Josip, a World War II veteran who runs the town’s historic funicular, follows suit when he finds out about Andrej’s illicit mail habit. Along the way, they become friends, all the while unaware that the other is a Judas.

Each feels he deserves more from life — Josip, more love; Andrej, more recognition — and though their methods may be unsavory, they remain sympathetic if simple characters trying to get by in a complicated world. And it’s about to get a whole lot more complicated, as [civil war](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17632399%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) draws ever closer. Because, even here, in this “wallflower of European history,” known only for its clock museum and pink pelicans, deeply held hatreds lie in wait. “Sometimes it seemed to the townspeople that the sunshine and sparkling blue sea might be camouflaging some approaching misfortune and inevitable death,” Driessen writes. “But most people chose not to think about it. Not think about it, and carry on with one’s everyday activities, seemed the most sensible thing to do.” Everyday activities like delivering letters, operating the funicular, going fishing, cheating on your wife and blackmailing your friend.