

Lend me your character

Dubravka Ugrešić

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Reviewed by Tatjana Aleksić

Rutgers University

This new edition of short fiction by Dubravka Ugrešić in a translation by Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim contains her best-known short stories, formerly published under the title *In the Jaws of Life*, now revamped and with a new Author's Note. Of interest for the reader is the fact that all the stories in this collection were written in the 1980's, before the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, and the events that forced the author into a self-imposed exile, so that the stories offer a real treat in postmodern literary experiment, for anybody thus inclined. This short fiction collection reminds the reader that texts coming from ex-Yugoslav territories could be unpoliticized and interested in experimenting with literature *per se*, if only the current grim social reality would allow for such luxury. One of predominant concerns of the texts in this selection is the problematic relationship between the categories of fiction and reality, which relentlessly intrude into each other's realms from the onset of the now already classic "Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life" all the way through "Lend Me Your Character", which rounds up the collection. Another runs along the lines of gender and stereotyped social roles.

Ugrešić's narrative can be placed into the tradition of women's postmodern literature and experimental writing, which necessitated a radical redefinition of the female *subject*—both the writing and narrative subjects—and their liberation from the constraints of patriarchy even in postmodern fiction written by men.¹ The method applied for the purpose, therefore, is both the pastiche technique of cutting and gluing together bits and pieces of someone else's texts and, in essence, challenging, or "defacing tradition", but also a revisionist method of rewriting, or replacing "traditional plots and narrative categories" in master texts with those that empower female narrative subjects.²

¹ It is also important to keep in mind the Foucauldian definition of the twofold meanings of the *subject*: «subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meaning suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to». (Cornis-Pope 87).

² *Ibid.*, 86.

This collection unites the two methods in its two novellas: “Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life”, and “Life is a Fairy Tale” the latter comprising several short stories. Defined by some as belonging to the tradition of “kitchen novels”, which is probably another way of sending women writers to their predesignated space in the world defined by literary patriarchs, the narrative of “Steffie Cvek” is structurally a patchwork, a ‘typically’ or, should we say, *stereotypically* feminine occupation, which Ugrešić employs in her process of fragmenting, connecting, patching up, and tying, pieces of (her)story, agony aunt advice, and the traditional ‘wisdom’. Steffie Cvek, an average spinster with a boring job and an even worse social life, undergoes a series of depressing encounters with friends and unknown men in search of a fairy tale love. The narrative clearly subverts stereotyped gender and social roles, like in Steffie’s failed one-night stands with three unknown lovers—the redneck, the Balkan he-man, and the disillusioned intellectual—none of whom, however, lives up to his role of a macho seducer. By placing a copy of *Madame Bovary* into Steffie’s hands the text underlines not only the *ennui* and pointlessness of her daily life, which in many respects parallels that of Flaubert’s heroine, but also the restrictive treatment of female narrative subjects in the sphere of traditional realist fiction. Unlike the Madame’s, however, Steffie’s story has a happy ending. It is difficult to read this text with any notion of ‘objectivity’ of literature in mind, as frequent intrusions into the narrative arrive from the author herself, to the point that the author’s whole female family and a couple of neighbors are involved in shaping up the various endings to the story. These are moments when reality breaks into the narrative and disturbs the reader’s illusion of the objective integrity of the text which supposedly exists independently of both the reader and the author (no, this author is not dead).

The second part of the collection consists mostly in revisions of some of the master texts of world literature. Such is “A Hot Dog in a Warm Bun”, a rewriting of Gogol’s “The Nose” which, unlike Gogol’s text whose sting is directed against the Russian bureaucratic apparatus, applies its explicit metaphor to the Yugoslav literary establishment in which writers are divided into those “with balls” and those “without balls” (Author’s notes, 235). According to author’s own admission, some 20% of text in “Who Am I?”, a surreal dream-like adventure, in which eggs speak while lovers melt before Alice’s very eyes, was derived from *Alice in Wonderland*. A successful example of textual revision arrives in “The Kreutzer Sonata” which transports Tolstoy’s characters into a less Christian world in which the figure of the virtuous husband who grants forgiveness to his sinning wife is substituted by a writer-to-be thieving money off a fellow-writer in return for a captivating story. “Kharms Case”, inspired by the work of the 1920’s Russian avant-garde poet Daniil Kharms, deals

with the fiction-reality involvement not only in the story itself, but in the author's life as well. The narrative revolves around the correspondence of a translator of Kharms's work and an editor in a publishing house through the period of almost ten years, during which the translation fails to be published but their lives get brought together by Kharms's fiction. The translator eventually leaves the editor for a Swedish expert on Kharms. Ugrešić, who translated the first volume of Kharms's work ever to appear in Croatia in 1989, has her own story with a certain expert on Kharms, who was willing to share his first-hand knowledge of Kharms's life in exchange for some cash (Note, 242). It may be interesting to note here that a film titled *Slučaj Harms* (The Kharms Case) was made in the former Yugoslavia in 1987, in which the writer-character exploring his literary cases catches the eye of the regime and himself becomes a "case". The film is based on Kharms's collection of short fiction *Cases* and his own life, in which he became one of innumerable victims of Stalinist dislike for fictional renditions of contemporary Soviet reality. There are no credits acknowledging the participation of Ugrešić in any aspects of the film, but the almost simultaneous appearance of the story, film, and the publication of Kharms's first collection in Croatian make for an uncanny intervention of fiction in the lives of its creators. Finally, the last fine line between the aspects of fiction and reality is erased in the story which ends the collection, "Lend me Your Character", in which a writer's character gets appropriated and transformed in a text of another writer while the two writers/lovers themselves become characters in each other's fiction.

The reappearance of this collection in a new edition is a commendable effort in bringing the writings of the so-called "other" Europe closer to the Western reader and rounding up on the collection of translated writings by Dubravka Ugrešić. The wit and insightfulness of Ugrešić's stories, likewise, make for a very good introduction not only in the postmodern literature of the former Yugoslavia but also in the genre of short fiction written by women. Some of the stories in this selection deserve to find their way to any short fiction class syllabus.

WORKS CITED

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