

FICTION

## She'll have you in stitches!

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### Lend Me Your Character

By Dubravka Ugresic

Translated by Celia Hawkesworth

and Michael Henry Heim



Dalkey Archive Press,

246 pages, \$15.95

"Traditional writers will disappear, like umbrella menders," writes Dubravka Ugresic in *Thank You for Not Reading*, and it is the years of living in capitalist countries that have made this very non-traditional writer adopt a defensive "traditionalist" stand.

Many of Ugresic's essays published post-exile deal with the deprofessionalization of the literary field: the proliferation of books by celebrities, gurus, teenagers, athletes, bloggers, politicians and pets; that is, together with the bottom-line approach to manuscript acquisition, production and promotion, changing the nature of literary culture. The traditional writing she is defending is emphatically *not* that of realism, the masculine gender or the division between high and low cultures. First know thy canon, then problematize it, is the rule Ugresic's work suggests we should safeguard, and there is no better illustration of how this non-traditionalist traditional writing works than her latest collection in English, *Lend Me Your Character*.

All those readers versed in Yugoslaviana will be happy to learn that Stefica Cvek is finally speaking English -- and fluently. *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life (A Little Patchwork Novel)*, in both its literary and cinematic versions, has been a Yugoslav alt classic for years and is now among the most quoted items in any of the on-line lexicons of Yugo-mythology.

The story of a typist who lives with her elderly aunt and dreams of romance was a parody of women's self-help, chick-lit and *Sex and the City* long before they became such mass phenomena, but is also a commentary on that most archetypal of "women's" genres, the romance novel. It is a very careful parody, however, since Ugresic knows that simple ridicule will not do. Ugresic's main interest is to see what is missing in women's lives that they seem to find in this genre and nowhere else.

In the original Croat-Serbian version, Steffie's path of self-improvement included learning English, but Ugresic's translator, Celia Hawkesworth, opted for French as Steffie's new language in the English edition. Readers curious to find out what Steffie's aunt pronouncing "blood type" in English with a Bosnian accent might sound like are advised to rent the movie.

How well *Steffie* fits in with the rest of the stories in the book we come to realize as we read on. With a rare explicit quote by Walter Benjamin that opens the section -- and the quotes that Ugresic usually employs for openings or closings are much more cryptic and witty, and contain Baba Yagas (a witch from Slavic folklore) who hatch eggs, turnips that look more like potatoes, or the rants by Eeyore of Winnie the Pooh -- Ugresic lets us in on some of her narrative strategies for this book:

"The power of the text when it is read is different from the power it has when it is copied out," and she converses with literary history by "copying out" (and immediately displacing) a character, a synopsis, a symbol and, in moments of greatest indulgence, a verbatim sentence or two. When she copies, she copies from turnips to potatoes, not from turnips to turnips. In *Steffie*, the elements of genre, the clichés and the quotes from women's magazines are being recycled. For the rest of the stories, we have our own literary tastes and a few of Ugresic's pointers in the postscript as guidance.

This afterword, written in 2003, may look like an explanation or an update, but is actually a constitutive part of storytelling. As in the stories themselves, there are references to other books, real or imaginary, journalistic or historic sources, and actual or pretend confessions of the writer herself. We may or may not take heed of the interpretations that she is willing to offer, but we will certainly

feel provoked to grab many other texts and authors -- reread our Gogol, finally get hold of Tolstoy's lesser-known works, rekindle our interest in the early Soviet avant-garde, start reminding people that there are other Czech writers beside Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel.

Readers of Borges will nod knowingly, fans of Alfred Jarry will recognize an accomplice. The archeologists of Yugoslaviana will not leave empty-handed, either. Feminists will feel at home. Everybody will laugh reading *Hot Dog in a Warm Bun*, the story in which all things phallic get, well, slightly unhinged -- but those interested in psychoanalysis will have a field day. *Lend Me Your Character* may be eccentrically read as a commentary on the Bad Sex Award. And so on.

A good read is precisely this extended travel through texts other than the one read, and *Lend Me Your Character* asserts this as our right. This is arguably the best book by Dubravka Ugresic available in English, and it deserves the type of praise that Ugresic is usually uneasy about: sexy, hip, funny. But why stop with promotional quotables: *She will have you roaring with laughter! She will make Danil Kharms a household name! Look no more for the anti-Alice Munro!*

*Lydia Perovic grew up in Yugoslavia, and only after reading Ugresic has discovered how much she misses the world of umbrella menders. Her essays have been published in Critical Sense and at openDemocracy.org.*

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