

The Independent

The Ministry of Pain, by Dubravka Ugresic, translated by Michael Henry Heim

Beyond the borders of brutality

By Aamer Hussein

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Dubravka Ugresic's genre-bending works cross bridges between the novel and short story, theory and memoir. The novels *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the short fictions of *In the Jaws of Life* and *The Culture of Lies*, and a volume of essays, *Thank You for Not Reading* have elicited comparisons with the giants of Central and Eastern Europe. With all her diligent allusions to the canon, she is, however, a very original writer: less loftily mandarin than some predecessors, more subtle and humane than many contemporaries. Her playful, ironic but sober fictions engage with the grand themes that readers associate with the literatures of her region: love, language; the mythology, and arbitrary imposition, of borders and identities; the nomad's roving imaginative life.

Readers enthralled by the postmodern sophistication of her earlier fictions may be surprised by the seeming plain approach and simple prose of *The Ministry of Pain*. Ugresic's new novel is set in Amsterdam about two years before the bombing of Belgrade by Nato forces, among the exiles who find themselves adrift in a Europe that does not comprehend their pain. It is narrated by one, Tanja Lucic, who left Croatia with her Serb partner Goran, and teaches the literature of ex-Yugoslavia to ex-Yugoslavs. Her students are Bosnians, Croatians and Serbs with varied political perspectives and reasons for leaving.

Tanja, in search of a community that transcends artificial boundaries, prevails upon her students to write their memories - in English. Ugresic inserts other narratives into Tanja's first-person account: boxes enclosing other voices, other lives.

Tanja has her own legacy to contend with: the written confession of her father, a convinced anti-fascist Partisan who "turned from victim to torturer and turned Mama into a mother confessor". Ugresic's cunning, subtle technique is at its most powerful here. Tragedy mingles with pastiche and bizarre humour.

As a prelude to his suicide, the hapless Uros, whose father has been

accused of war crimes, recites an epic poem at Tanja's birthday party. Tanja suffers from her own exclusion when forced to conform to a more formal curriculum. Then her enigmatic student Igor presents her with a subversive fairy tale; when she fails him, he turns up to bully her into facing her self-deceptions and illusions about language, memory and community.

The novel's conclusion is a profound and beautiful meditation on lost homes and territories, on the broken syntax of memory, on the self-inventions of rehabilitated refugees and on the capability to return and find what we left behind. Above all, Ugresic maps our ability to survive and to tell the stories of our survival, even when scarred and deprived by war and banishment of those myths we once claimed as signifiers of our identity.

Aamer Hussein's latest volume of stories is 'This Other Salt'