

Adrift on the map

Todd McEwen is impressed by Dubravka Ugresic's portrait of an exile from the former Yugoslavia, *The Ministry of Pain*

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The Ministry of Pain

Dubravka Ugresic

translated by Michael Henry Heim

252pp, Saqi, £9.99

In her delightful, stirring book of essays, *Thank You for Not Reading*, Dubravka Ugresic wrote of one of the "advantages of exile": "exile is a voluntary job of deconstructing the established values of human life. The exile, like it or not, tests the basic concepts around which everyone's life revolves: concepts of home, homeland, family, love, friendship, profession, personal biography. Having completed the long and arduous journey of battling with the bureaucracy of the country where he has ended up, having finally acquired papers, the exile forgets the secret knowledge he has acquired on his journey, in the name of life which must go on."

The Ministry of Pain is a brave, accomplished, cultured novel, sombre and witty. It is the story of just such an exile, Tanja Ucić, who leaves Zagreb in dismay and confusion and finds herself teaching the languages and literature of her "former Yugoslavia" at a university in Amsterdam, living in a subterranean flat on the edge of the red-light district. "I was, naturally, well aware of the absurdity of my situation: I was to teach a subject that no longer officially existed. What we called jugoslavistika at the university - that is, Slovene, Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian literature - had disappeared as a discipline together with its country of origin."

Tanja is plucky, but also easily sidetracked by the pain she feels in the large community of her fellow émigrés: "'our people' had an invisible slap on their faces". In the cities of western Europe she goes to Croatian cafes and bars, but is often filled with despair rather than camaraderie: "Surrounded by smoke rings, they looked as 'former' as their one-time nationality; they looked like corpses that had risen from the grave for a bottle of beer and a round of cards but had ended up in the wrong place."

Feeling culturally wounded, and believing her students feel the same, Tanja throws the curriculum out of the window and becomes a literary therapist. She attempts to reconstruct the land they have lost through an informal seminar, amusing, haunting and bloody: a "jugonostalgia" of their speech, cultural backgrounds, experiences of war. One girl writes about a typical red, white and blue plastic holdall, seen at émigré markets, and Tanja seizes on it as a metaphor. From now on, their essays will be about what they want to remember, good and bad, of the life of their non-existent country - each item will be put in the "holdall". But the contents of this holdall

become burdensome and eventually too nasty - in the end, only Tanja believes it is actually holding anything.

Then her professorship is terminated. She loses the ability to place herself in the world and spirals down into a depression - a striking meditation on the nature of war, language and displacement, the task of accepting one's new country and one's new self: "The past is our 'installation', amateur stuff but with artistic pretensions. With a touch-up here and a touch-up there, here a touch, there a touch, everywhere a touch-touch." This is Ugresic at her best, constantly finding fascinating ways to portray the conundrums of the age and the quirky grammar of thought.

She moves quickly, almost enchantingly, from one comic or rueful consideration to another (Thank You for Not Reading was peppered with quotations from AA Milne's Eeyore, and there is a deep ironic level on which he and Ugresic commune). Can an exile ever be entirely happy with the new place? Will it always have an unreality? "For me [Amsterdam] had the proportions of a child. Shop-windows in the red-light district displaying live dolls for grown-ups, porno shops decked out to resemble toy shops, kindergarten-like coffee shops ... it's not that this urban infantilism is subversive or derisive ... it's just that it's turned Amsterdam into a kind of melancholy Disneyland."

Tanja undergoes some shocking experiences, one the kind of random violence that exiles often take to be too much about themselves. In the middle of her painful withdrawal, her exile within exile, she voices a humbling, striking vision of the Europe that is to be, full of frightening, ambitious people from the broken nations, rootless technocrats, "net and web people" whose loyalties and assumptions will have to be tracked very carefully. There are also profound ruminations on the staggering amount of non-guilt we're capable of feeling these days, thanks to the endless filters of media through which we experience our brutalities to each other.

But despite the breadth and depth of its political and literary ambitions, *The Ministry of Pain* is possessed of a wonderful, clear simplicity. There are very pure pleasures in Ugresic's honesty, her lightsome, moving prose, her ability to dance in a flash from outrage to satire to a heartfelt exposition of beauty. In the end, Tanja comes to a pragmatic, darker understanding of what it means to be adrift on the map, returning to her linguistic roots in an astonishing fashion. The novel answers emphatically one of the questions Ugresic sets Tanja and herself: "whether a language that hasn't learned to depict reality, complex as the inner experience of that reality may be, is capable of doing anything at all - telling stories, for instance." Oh yes.

· Todd McEwen's novel *Who Sleeps with Katz* is published by Granta
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