

Feminism And Folklore, Braided Into Modern Life

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In the fairy tale world, it's never a good sign when the old woman arrives. She'll try to shove the children into the oven, or poison the princess, or lock someone away in a tower. Baba Yaga, the villain of many Eastern European and Russian folk tales, is the epitome of the nasty old hag. She lives in a hut propped up on chicken legs, and if you try to enter, the house will turn itself around to hide the door. She has a large nose and chin, and massive, droopy breasts that she hangs over a pole when resting. She scares children and, in some of the stories, eats them. Old men in fairy tales get to be smart and magical, like Merlin. Old women just get to be frightening.

It wasn't always this way. In the older, oral myths from which these stories originated, the witch had as much wisdom as the wizard. In our modern world, the aged woman is stripped of power, of beauty, of sexuality until she is either malevolent or invisible. In *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic explores the issues of women and aging through three different retellings of the Baba Yaga story. She opens with a funny and candid essay about her own complicated relationship to her elderly mother, and the fear of witnessing her physical and mental decline as she turns into a dotty old hag.

The book ends with what at first appears to be a scholarly article about the symbols and themes of the Baba Yaga tales, but, like her strange little house, it soon stands up and turns around on you very quickly.

The collection's powerful centerpiece is a short story about three old women — Beba, Pupa and Kukla — who check into a health spa/hotel to live out the rest of their days. All three react differently to their aged state: Kukla is enjoying widowhood after a series of oppressive marriages; Beba discovers her maternal side when she meets a shell-shocked masseuse from her war-torn country; and Pupa, the frailest of the trio, is frustrated

with her inability to die.

"Pupa," Ugresic writes, "often dreams about how nice it would be if someone were to take her to Greenland and forget about her, lose her the way one loses an umbrella or gloves." Ugresic and Baba Yaga restore what age has stripped away: sex, motherhood, visibility and creative power.

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg is the latest volume in the Canongate Myth series, where authors like Margaret Atwood and Victor Pelevin pick an ancient story (the tales of Penelope, and Theseus and the Minotaur, respectively) and update it — but far surpass its predecessors. Ugresic has created a wise, sharp fairy tale of her own. And like one of those mythic stories, it's slow to reveal its secrets. Every element has hidden meaning, and repeat readings are rewarded. The three parts, each one substantial on its own, feed in to one another to create something majestic. It's a work worthy of any crone. And I mean that as a compliment.