

The Common Review

Surprisingly, I Don't Care Anymore

By Richard Byrne

Dubravka Ugrešić is the most prominent writer to emerge from the former Yugoslavia in recent times. Though she has written movingly, in novels and essays, about the wars that ripped apart that country and the painful healing processes that have been in place since the end of the conflicts, it would be a mistake to see Ugrešić as a writer defined only by bloodbath in the Balkans. Her sharp and scathing essays on writers and the economy of bookselling—many of which are collected in *Thank You for Not Reading* (2003)—articulated the anxieties and absurdities of the contemporary literary marketplace. And Ugrešić's most recent novel, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2009), uses myth and comedy as a springboard for a deeply-felt meditation on aging and femininity. Playwright and novelist Richard Byrne interviewed Ugrešić for The Common Review by e-mail in late September about the place of the writer in a turbulent world economy and *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*.

Byrne: Your essay on the future of the writer in *Thank You for Not Reading* stands up very well a decade later. How do you feel about more recent trends in the economy of literature: the rise of the e-book and the continuing erasure of the levels of literary distinction? How much have we lost in the last ten years as we slowly lose the book as an object?

Ugrešić: Things have gotten much worse in the meantime. In *Thank You for Not Reading*, or at least in most of the essays, I invented a narrator, my alter ego, an East European writer, a grumbler, Eeyore. The subtitle of the book, *Essays on Literary Trivia*, was also a self-protective measure. Using humor, self-mockery, and a strategy of fictionalization of the facts, I managed, I guess, to soften all the seriousness of my diagnosis of the illness of contemporary literature, the literary world, the literary market, and publishing. The truth packed in a light and funny package was easier to swallow, I guess. Today, things are not funny anymore. Writers, authors, intellectuals—all are endangered species, and the cultural sphere that was built and developed during the Gutenberg epoch is disappearing. We have entered a new epoch: a digital one. We find ourselves in a new cultural environment, and its basic premises are high-tech barbarism, the democratic participation of literally everybody, and the erasure of institutions such as the author, tradition, competence, and a hierarchy of knowledge. Now I sound like Sam, the American eagle from *The Muppet Show*, but surprisingly, I don't care anymore.

Byrne: The send-up of academia in *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* is past amusing; it's really trenchant. Many writers have a negative notion of the industry of

interpretation that makes up the academic enterprise--especially when its tools dissect their own work. How are you disposed to this sort of critical reading, especially now that successive waves of strong academic theory (New Criticism, Marxism, deconstruction) seem to have dwindled to a sort of tranquil pool from which scholars draw only what they find useful?

Ugrešić: What I used in *Baba Yaga*, in its third part, is a sort of fictionalized interpretation of the book, interpolated into a novel's body. It all came out naturally and harmonically, I hope. Contemporary fiction today is returning back to its origins, it seems. When you read some contemporary novelistic icons, you might notice that their novels very much resemble eighteenth century novels in all their aspects: plot, simplicity of language, etcetera. Such novels do not need a heavy literary theory to be explained. Their interaction with the "common" reader is pleasurable and direct. Their opposites, the writers of more demanding literary works, might soon find themselves in the position of "educators," self-interpreters and self-translators--not because they follow the long-dead postmodernist tradition, but out of necessity. If no one else is doing the job of teaching the reader how to read the literary text, writers themselves will be forced to do that in order not to be misunderstood. The majority of readers, including today's students of literature, tend to read a literary text as they read any other text: a dishwasher manual, a newspaper article, or an e-mail.

Byrne: *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* revisits the formal playfulness of your earliest fiction--a first novel and stories republished as *Lend Me Your Character* (2005) and a second novel, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (1988). How do you view your earliest works now?

Ugrešić: My early books were a result of internal literary freedom. I was a student of comparative literature and a passionate reader, and those books were my play with the literary context of that time and with an imaginary, all-understanding, ideal reader. *Baba Yaga* is just a prolongation of that play with and within literature.

Byrne: Another thing that I found so wonderful about *Baba Yaga* was how vividly you transmit the inner world of aging--and especially how that experience affects women. My own theory is that most writers refuse to tackle aging candidly because of the difficulties involved in rendering that experience--and also because it's scary. How challenging was it for you to do so?

Ugrešić: The biggest challenge was the first part of the novel, which is a sort of autobiographical, "documentary" description of my own mother's aging and illness. Aging is scary, you are right, but women artists are braver in dealing with the theme than men are. I just recently saw *The Savages*, a film directed by Tamara Jenkins. It's a masterpiece--a precise analysis of old age and a middleaged child's attitude towards aging. Your aging parent is you, your biography; what your parent is now is what waits for you in the future. We--or I, at least--got tired of the terror of youth culture, of that general infantilism which has penetrated into every bit of our contemporary culture. It seems that we are not adults anymore. Our culture forces us to prolong our stay in a

nursery and move from there straight to a nursing home. As if there is no life in between.

Byrne: Which writers continue to give you pleasure in reading and rereading their work? And are there writers you've found, or appreciate more, as years have passed--especially writers whom you didn't like or dismissed earlier in life?

Ugrešić: I can always read and reread some classics, such as Isaac Babel, for instance. Relatively recently, I reread Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, because that was the favorite book of my recently deceased mother. It gave me enormous pleasure. I can't even explain why. Probably because I was unconsciously projecting into it my mother's adolescent energy of imagination. I like writers. I understand perfectly well what an enormous amount of life energy, time, and hard work went into a written word, and consequently into a communication with the unknown reader. And I sometimes feel pity for all of them, from Shakespeare to my contemporaries, in the same way I sometimes feel self-pity. It is the same kind of pity you feel for your family; you know them well--that's where that pity comes from.

Richard Byrne is an award-winning playwright and journalist. His play *Burn Your Bookes* (2010) was produced last May by Taffety Punk Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. A former editor at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, his essays and criticism have appeared in *Book Forum*, the *Guardian*, the *Nation*, and the Belgrade-based review *Biblioteka Alexandria*. He blogs at *Balkans via Bohemia* (<http://RichByrne.blogspot.com/>).

This entry was posted on March 14, 2012 and is filed under Article.