



Pain management

Dubravka Ugresic's new novel examines the marketplace of misfortune

By Adam Klein

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REVIEW Imagine for a moment that one's national identity is ultimately an inadequacy, a neurosis, or a failure of character. It would be far too simple to suggest that the characters in Dubravka Ugresic's novel *The Ministry of Pain* suffer the anomie of exile. The profound alienation in which they exist cannot be assuaged by communalism, shared memories, or even the particularities of a native language. The world is a harder, colder place than that, and the fact that you can't go back again is probably your only blessing.

Uncompromising, unsettling, and persuasive, *The Ministry of Pain* is a precise indictment of the business of inhumanity. It should be read by anyone who professes to care about the vast displacements, physical and psychological, occurring in the world at present. It is a book of such violent loneliness that its universality is a thing of terror.

The novel centers on a group of drifters from the former Yugoslavia who are brought together in a classroom in Amsterdam: Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Slovenians, Macedonians, Montenegrins — all sharing their "Yugonostalgia," a dismal remembrance of childhood products, songs, and shared foods. War has shattered their country like a dinner plate, and their reluctant teacher, Tanja Lucic, must navigate the minefield of now permanently stateless youths. Pedagogy implies the sharing of ideas. In a classroom in which nothing is shared — particularly complicity in the failure of their former country — the only thing that remains is a desire for discipline and structure, as though minus a subject the students still expect to be evaluated, judged.

Ugresic's novel begins apprehensively, almost violently, like the act of an autistic child. Tanja states that she at times desires to bash her head into the glass case of an Amsterdam transit map. She is unable to express herself in her native language, both because she is living in a place where it isn't understood and because of what she's come to recognize as its inherent ineptness. She is left to ponder "the larger question of 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." Yet a story forms, not one of interlinking lives but of lives unglued, of little relevance to one another. Ugresic's characters mostly survive, but their survival seems mechanical and discordant, as though there were no world into which their reintegration mattered.

Ugresic's narrative is only vaguely invested in the personal triumphs and tragedies of Tanja and her students. They merely depict the journey made by the emergent "post-Communist underbrush" for whom Ugresic envisions a future in either the management or the slave class. "They will form a vibrant young contingent of specialists, organizers, operators and, above all, managers, experts in business management, political management, ecological management, cultural management, disaster management — the management of life. They will be a genus that propagates itself with inhuman rapidity, as if propagation were their sole aim in life. They are the type that always lands on its feet, that has no qualms about living off the misfortunes of the people they help, because even misfortune needs to be managed: Misfortune without management is merely failure." Toiling on the margins of these "professionals" she sees the throwaway products of the black market: "They will rent out fresh East European sexual organs to the weary ones of Enlarged Europe."

By the novel's end, Tanja finds herself at the Anne Frank museum reading computer-generated quiz questions about Frank's life. A phenomenally unsettling moment handled with understated bravery, it makes the story of Frank — that doomed icon of cultural memory and forgiveness — and her death seem eerily alien and ineffective. For those of us raised on the mythic struggles of Eastern Europe, particularly the grim survivor stories of the Holocaust, Ugresic's book interrogates the concept of its redemptive end and the value of a remembrance that has come to look more and more like reenactment.

Ugresic looks at war for what it is: empty, savage repetitions that breed industries, academies, museums, and identities. At one point Tanja imagines "a Hague Tribunal the size of a matchbox, with tiny judges in tiny gowns, tiny defendants and witnesses, tiny counsels for the defense and prosecution, miniature surrogates simulating a life in which right and wrong exist."

But in a marketplace built on the management of pain, no one can ever afford justice. It is a marketplace in which the nobility of pain is a sale item. Every great work rendered from mass killings and extinctions, the monumental movements of refugees, the world falling into vicious militias — all of this builds the reputations of reporters, installs the bureaucrats, makes for the largest embassies.

The titular Ministry of Pain, mentioned only briefly, is a place where fetish clothing is manufactured by some of Tanja's students. The novel indicts neither sex work nor human trafficking, but rather the frivolity of capitalist freedom. And Tanja does not contrast the pain of war with Dutch liberality, but rather, conflates them: The refugees and their new compatriots are equally alienated from their pain. It's surprising and yet consistent, then, that Tanja ultimately chooses to live with a former student who has physically assaulted her. In a world where survival offers the choice to live in daily pain or to purchase it as an erotic simulation, which would you choose? SFBG

THE MINISTRY OF PAIN

By Dubravka Ugresic

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