

Bookforum

Hagiography

Dubravka Ugrešić finds feminist mettle in an Eastern European witch

[Mary Gaitskill](#)

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg by Dubravka Ugrešić is on the simplest level about the adventures of four old hags, plus their families and friends, adventures seen through the palimpsest narration of ur-witch Baba Yaga—the greatest hag of 'em all. I don't use the word *hag* impudently here. The author not only invites the term; in this strange and wonderful book, she *owns* it.

Divided into three parts, the book begins with a mundane tale about a difficult mother-daughter relationship and gradually hints at something eerie hidden in the folds of its plain skirt. The story is located in Zagreb, which, we learn from the daughter (who is the narrator and happens to be an author), is suffering a plague of birds gone wild, taking over parks, subway stations, and restaurants. This coincides with the mother's mind gone wild from breast cancer spread to the brain, resulting in tragicomic mental confusion, scrambled speech, compensatory rigidity, and pointless territorial wars with her daughter over cupboards, pictures, food, and clothes. Then there are the usual indignities—incontinence, lost beauty, and social invisibility.

Wanting to help, the daughter makes a trip to her mother's childhood home in Bulgaria, in order to take photographs so that Mom might have one more look at the place. Here she meets a weird and annoying young woman anagrammatically named Aba Bagay (hint, hint), a folklorist and over-enthusiastic fan of the author's books who has also managed to insert herself into the mother's affections. Although Bagay is supposedly in town to visit friends, she follows the author everywhere, staying in her hotel

rooms, quoting her books, even ordering the same food at restaurants; the narrator seethes inside but allows the intrusion out of obligation and guilt.

This minor, muddy, and vaguely awful encounter culminates in a tale told by the folklorist called "The Tsar-maiden," about a young man who must journey across the sea to find a girl's heart in a four-times hidden egg and then trick the girl into eating it. The narrator is charmed by the story but soon sees in the tone of its telling a "hunger for attention; a blind hunger which sought to be led by the blind; a crippled hunger which sought an ally in the crippled, the hunger of a deaf mute cooing to a deaf mute." Aba Bagay is desperate for attachment and approval, and that makes her an emotional tar baby for the author, who thinks, with a kind of despair: "Yes, love is on the distant shore of a wide sea. A large oak tree stands there, and in the tree there is a box, in the box a rabbit, in the rabbit a duck, and in the duck an egg. And the egg, in order to get the emotional mechanism going, had to be eaten."

At this point, in the mood for some more dramatic witchery, I skipped ahead, looking for Baba Yaga. I found her in the third section, where instead of wreaking havoc, she serves as a subject for the annoying Aba Bagay, who somehow got the job of providing a study guide for Ugrešić's book! If I rolled my eyes at this piece of clumsy cleverness, I was still so engaged I couldn't stop reading.

Baba Yaga, a Slavic yet international figure, is a hideous old woman with a skeleton leg who eats kids and flies around in a giant mortar, or a hypertrophied womb. She lives in a hut atop live chicken legs, surrounded by skulls on fence posts; the gate is made of human bones; the door latch is made of human hands; the lock is a mouth with sharp teeth. It's an abode that's also a body, human and animal, dead and alive. Inside lurks Baba, "her nose touching the ceiling, her slobber seeping over the doorstep...she tosses her breasts onto the stove or hangs them 'over a pole,' or even 'shuts the oven door with her breasts,' while snot trails out of her nose, and she 'scoops up soot with her tongue.'"

Sometimes she has a daughter, sometimes forty-one of them, and

sometimes she eats them, sometimes by mistake, sometimes not. In one account, she drinks too much seawater after gobbling flour and salt, then bursts and gives "violent birth to frogs, mice, snakes, worms and spiders." She is the "aunt of all witches," a villain, avenger, sentry between worlds, donor, adviser, and, if you play your cards right, of great help. She is unpredictable and amoral. She is associated with time and weather. She has hordes of lesser sisters who eat hearts, who knead dough with their breasts, who shape-shift, who come back from the dead to "give suck" to their babies. She has a special relationship with birds, which Ugrešić calls "symbolic postmen" between heaven and earth. Like birds, Baba produces and traffics in eggs, and her eggs are magic. She is obscene but rarely sexual; in the spirit of Baba Yaga, "old women in southern Serbia" run naked around their family homes during storms shouting, "Don't you, dragon, / fight my monster, / it's devoured lots like you! / Flee, you monster, from my monster! / They can't both be master here."

And so, with heightened interest, I flipped back to the second section, which opens with three much more genteel hags from Zagreb checking in at an expensive spa in the Czech Republic for a vacation. They are Beba, a former hospital worker with exhausted blond hair and monster-size breasts, who nervously, impossibly quotes entire poems she has never learned and mixes up phrases, for example "See you, die!" instead of "Good-bye!"; Kukla, a tall, elegant, elderly virgin widowed multiple times; and Pupa, an ancient, acerbic gynecologist who resembles a "piece of humanoid crackling" and must be wheeled about by her friends because her deformed legs are perpetually wedged into a giant boot.

There are several colorful bit players and action bordering on the zany: Beba goes to the spa casino and wins thousands without realizing what's happened (incidentally defeating a mobster who said she has "tits like a hippopotamus"); Kukla turns out to be the anonymous and completely indifferent author of an acclaimed book; Pupa flies home in a gigantic wooden egg, decorated to look like "a garden of Eden painted by an amateur." There are huge surprises from the past, last-minute revelations, and unexpected bounty.

If the first section is rather gray, the second is drenched in Technicolor, and because I skipped ahead, Baba Yaga's leering face peered through it all, giving depth and weight to what otherwise might've been a too-kooky, too-cute tale insistently peppered with rhymes like "While life gets tangled in the human game, the tale hastens to reach its aim!" The book is ridiculously overladen with eggs and birds, the mystical meaning of which Aba Bagay belabors to pieces—even Baba Yaga can't take the tedium out of that.

Ugrešić is also affecting and eloquent, in part because within her quirky, aggressively sweet plot she achieves moments of profundity and evokes the stoicism innate in such moments: These hags are also gallant women who have survived wars, displacement, death, estrangement from their families, and political brutality on an epic scale; one *has* devoured her children emotionally; one has magically benefited a man who beat her.

I'm not even sure that in the context of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* Ugrešić's lapses in literary taste are lapses at all. For Baba Yaga's hut is a place of chaos, riddles, slippage, and between-ness, where life lives in death, beauty nests inside pestilence, and mothers suck their daughter's breasts. In this place, kitsch and cuteness are on speaking terms with the highest refinement, the deepest sufferings and joys; Ugrešić can move from one state to the other with earthy grace.

At the end of the book, Ugrešić—or that pesky Aba Bagay—tries to turn Baba Yaga into a feminist symbol, a sword-wielding matriarch ready to avenge centuries of brutality against women. I understand the impulse, but it is pure Hollywood. As Ugrešić describes Baba Yaga, she is neither good nor evil; she is raw, primal force, earth and sky both, paradoxically housed in a decaying body. She is a mythic version of what any old woman is—a sacred meeting place of life and death. (This statement may be made of old men, too, but less poignantly, for reasons too complex to describe here.) Only a fool would fail to have reverence for this place; only a fool would fail to be afraid of it and so to be repelled by it. Most of us feel both—and what a weight for an old lady to bear, along with everything else. What strange

powerless power, this involuntary embodiment of root forces, this wisdom so often beyond the strength of the body and the mind to express. Such power does not make itself felt through a sword, but through the soul. And not every soul is receptive to it.

While I was reading the book, I had an e-mail conversation with a friend who compared Baba Yaga to "another angry goddess," the fierce Tantric Kali. Kali isn't angry, I wrote back. She's just doing her job. Baba Yaga isn't angry, either. She is just being herself. Yes, she may or may not eat children. Some of whom happen to be her relations. But not because she's angry. Just hungry, at the time.

Mary Gaitskill's most recent book is the story collection *Don't Cry* (Pantheon, 2009).