

THE MILLIONS
REVIEWS

I'm with the Losers: On Dubravka Ugrešić's Europe in Sepia

By ANNE K. YODER *February 28, 2014*

AWP-goers take heed! As 10,000 writers descend on Seattle to take up the cause of literature, raising drinks and touting books and giving readings, certain questions may surface about the state of literature. We've been told that the author is dead; the book as form is dying; no one is reading and if they are, they're distracted. And so how is it that so many people are still at it with the pen? AWP conference attendance has ballooned in recent years as more and more writers empty their already shallow pockets for the exuberant and wearying spree packed with publishing tips, idol worship, and camaraderie. If something about this makes you wonder about the state of the métier, and, well, especially if it doesn't — **Dubravka Ugrešić** is the author to consult. And you're lucky because her latest book of essays, *Europe in Sepia*, will be waiting at the Open Letter table, one island in that vast archipelago of tables manned by booksellers pedaling their wares. The literary festival circuit is one that Ugrešić knows far more intimately than she'd like — in *Europe in Sepia* the reader follows her on a dizzying tour as she hurtles across the continent, from Bratislava to Budapest to Graz, and to destinations further off, Jerusalem; Oberlin, Ohio; and Zuccotti Park. This hectic pace of appearances sustains an esteemed writer who in an ideal world would be able to subsist off her writing. But these are not prosperous times and history hasn't been kind to Ugrešić on these matters. The constant motion with which she moves resonates with a line she quotes from *The Coming Insurrection*: "This world wouldn't be hurtling along with such speed were its own destruction not constantly at its heels."

The prognosis? It's not good. Ugrešić laments what has become of the author who has to perform to earn a pittance and a hot meal. She laments a culture where action and image trump the self-doubt and time for contemplation. She's covered some of this ground before, most recently in *Karaoke Culture*, but in *Europe in Sepia* her tone is more resigned. The digitalization of everything has drastically altered how the literary world operates: "no longer a space of contemplation, subversion, spiritually enriching escapism, or discovery, but one of spectacle...like it or not, they are all participants in the society of the spectacle. Measured by its yardsticks, they divide into winners and losers." And she's already identified her affinities on the matter, within the context of **Yuri Olesha's** novel *Envy*. The characters can be divided into two distinct types, exemplified by two brothers — Andrei, the rational and successful businessmen, and Ivan, the loser, the poetic soul, and dreamer. Ugrešić proclaims, "I'm with the losers."

For the uninitiated, Dubravka Ugrešić is a Croatian essayist, novelist, and intellectual who was expelled from her homeland during the Croatian War for her vocal opposition to the war and powers that be, opposition which drew accusations of sedition and witchcraft and of being a feminist who was raping her homeland. She's lived in exile ever since but still writes in her mother tongue. This language barrier distances her from Dutch literary culture in Amsterdam, where she now resides, as do the heightened tensions regarding worker immigration in the European Union. Ugrešić calls this constant state of unsettledness she's been exiled to the "out-of-nation zone," or ON-Zone for short. With ON-Zone status comes a series of dilemmas for an author of any stature, especially now: she must rely on translation to reach her readers but translations are in short supply; she does not have a national identity or readership to anchor her work. The end result? Relegation to the diminutive halls of a minor literature. That this untangling of political affiliations accompanies discussion of her writing only reinforces her claim.

And yet there's nothing minor about Ugrešić's mind, writing, or body of work. Ugrešić's writing is unified by her sharp wit, cunning mind, absurdist sensibility, and its fragmentation. Her "patchwork" fiction is littered with references to **Kafka** and **Isaac Babel** and interspersed with patterns and recipes and articles from women's magazines. Ugrešić's essays are just as fragmented, with her mind racing the hyperkinetic speed of her travels, it seems.

In *Europe in Sepia*, Ugrešić examines the current cultural climate, in Croatia, on the European continent, and here in the States. Her findings are bleak. In these precarious times, the patina of the past's optimism becomes even more alluring. Nostalgia and specifically the ways that nostalgia is repackaged as kitsch is an idea Ugrešić returns to again and again. Dutch author **Arnon Grunberg** wrote of Ugrešić's ongoing obsession with both seduction/manipulation and *poshlost* (defined by Nabokov as "a special term for smug philistinism") in a tribute to Ugrešić's oeuvre that ran on this site last year. In *Europe in Sepia*, Ugrešić examines how the popularity of memorabilia, like mugs bearing the mug of the Yugoslav revolutionary Tito, obscures the fact that important and challenging conversations about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars have failed to take place.

If *poshlost* and seduction perfuse her previous work, *Europe in Sepia* adds a throughline of defeat. And so Ugrešić sides with the losers. Epigraphs taken from Olesha's *Envy* precede each section of the book. They speak of mankind having reached an "upper limit," of "wrack and ruin," and the "dark and gloomy cesspool" of human emotion. Past promise has given way to the current culture of crises — economic, ecological, literary, you name it. And the future, whatever the prognostication, does not seem bright. Only the ecologists, who Ugrešić calls modern prophets, have answers: "When they say the end is nigh, it's believing time." And so Ugrešić adopts the stance of the cultural ecologist who speaks in biological parables. For example, regarding life in Central, South, and Southeastern Europe, she writes: "They don't try planting flowers — gardening is a belief in the future, and they have no future." It doesn't stop there. She uses lessons on biodiversity at Dublin's National Botanical gardens to examine growing hostility against immigrant workers. Population overgrowth and the disposability of the poor is raised in the context of resumption — or "green cremation," a cheaper and eco-friendly alternative to cremation that takes up less space and that's accompanied by a liquid portion stripped of DNA that can be used as fertilizer or thrown away.

Ultimately, Ugrešić's most dire forecast is for the writer: "As a specific human species, the majority of writers are facing extinction. Whether writers fall into the *critically endangered* group like Sumatran orangutans, the *endangered* group like Malaysian tigers, the *vulnerable* group like African elephants, the *near threatened* group together with the jaguar, or in the *least concern* group with the giraffe — let's leave that to the experts." At least the writers might take solace that they're not alone? But then, as of late, the fate of the giraffe at Dutch zoos isn't an enviable one either. In the categories of writers, however, the fate of the female author is even more dire. Ugrešić writes of the lose-lose situation the female author faces, and her inherent insecurity in the male dominant literary culture. A cult of personality is required for a woman to be canonized, and this is something more common among the fine arts, she laments, while she provides a fascinating analysis of **Marina Abramović's** *The Artist Is Present* as an act of self-deification.

But what's a woman to do? What's a writer to do? Of the two obvious choices, reticence or self-aggrandizement, neither works. There should be more choices, just as the airport bookstores she visits should offer more than books by **E.L. James** and **Julian Barnes**. True possibility lies in breaking out of this forced dichotomy. Ugrešić recognizes that despite her predictions of doom and gloom that not all is lost, not yet, not when revolution is in the air. Resistance in the form of Occupy Wall Street opened the door to one possible new beginning, or at least to not going out without a fight. Which helps to explain why despite Ugrešić's dire outlook, she remains invested: "We need to participate in the orgy of communication, even when it seems to those of us sending messages that communication is buried in the din, and thus senseless. Because somewhere on a distant shore a recipient awaits our message. To paraphrase **Borges**, he or she exists to misunderstand it and transform it into something else."