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Ignore the title, read the book

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MAGGIE HELWIG

Thank You for Not Reading:

Essays on Literary Trivia

By **Dubravka Ugresic**

Translated by Celia Hawkesworth

Dalkey Archive Press,

240 pages, \$18.50

**Dubravka Ugresic**, who was born and raised in the former Yugoslavia and now lives in Amsterdam, is probably best known in the West -- insofar as she is known at all, for she is still unjustly obscure -- for her book *The Culture of Lies*, a brilliant collection of essays dissecting the pathologies of the nationalist imagination. But she is also the author of a number of works of fiction, including her 1987 novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, a clever, comic and occasionally tragic satire on the literary cultures of the communist and capitalist worlds.

It is to this material that she returns for most of the essays in *Thank You for Not Reading*, though her main concern now, for obvious reasons, is the place of literature in a globalized and Americanized worldwide marketing system.

This may sound rather tedious; in fact, it is nothing of the sort. Ugresic is a demanding writer -- highly literate, complex, self-consciously postmodern -- but she is also brisk and funny, and a keen observer of the various cultures she has encountered in her peripatetic life since the

beginning of the Balkan wars. *Thank You for Not Reading* begins with a description of Joan Collins at the London Book Fair, and moves on to a selection of the author's literary dreams: "I dreamed that I had been captured by Radovan Karadzic, the war criminal, who tortured me by reciting his poems for children and adults. . . . I also dreamed that I was Joan Collins, that I had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and that I was writing my acceptance speech for Stockholm. In my dream, I sweated and shook with fear, although I didn't know what made me so afraid: receiving the Nobel Prize or receiving it as Joan Collins. Not even the fact that I was more than sixty years old and looked thirty was any comfort."

One of Ugresic's most interesting ideas, pursued through several essays, is that the demands of the contemporary marketplace are producing a literature startlingly similar to Soviet socialist realism: "realistic, optimistic . . . explicitly or implicitly didactic, and intended for the broad reading masses. . . . [I]t ideologically remolds and educates the working people in the spirit of personal victory, the victory of some good over some evil."

It is unlikely that anyone other than **Dubravka Ugresic** would have discovered this particular comparison, but once she has made it, it is impossible to regard Oprah's Book Club in quite the same way again.

There is little question that, despite the occasional fluke (Ugresic mentions visiting a nudist colony on the Adriatic where everyone was solemnly reading *The Name of the Rose*), realistic/mimetic fiction has a near-stranglehold on the market, alongside fiction that is barely even fiction at all but really thinly disguised inspirational self-help.

Ugresic herself, of course, with her surreal satirical fragments and her works that skate along the boundaries between essay, memoir and fiction, is precisely the kind of writer who doesn't thrive in the current marketplace (she notes that in her experience teaching literature in the United States, students demonstrate great anxiety over the question of whether events in books really happened or were just made up). Witness the fact that this book has been published by Dalkey Archive

Press, an exceptionally interesting but small and marginal publisher. She does not particularly try to hide this, and there is no sense that *Thank You for Not Reading* is a bunch of sour grapes; rather, it is a useful illustration of its own theses.

Unlike Ugresic, I am not sure that serious literature is uniquely threatened in our generation; serious literature is probably always threatened, and complaints that literature is now finished for good go back nearly as far as literature itself. But she is a skilled diagnostician of many of our present ills, and she is also far too intelligent to offer firm conclusions or any fixed ideology -- one of the essays is titled Questions to an Answer, and when, in this essay, she discusses the problems of globalization, she balances her concerns with an awareness of just how much destruction was caused in her own country by a vicious adherence to "the local (national, ethnic, regional). . . . Simply on the basis of my traumatic experience of the local, the global gains additional points."

*Thank You for Not Reading* also includes a lengthy and thoughtful piece about "the writer in exile," which once again manages to raise a number of difficult and important questions without offering any easy answers, and concludes with an intriguing parable about the aspiring writer who renovated her apartment, and the handful of pages he left behind the water main.

It would be a fine thing if this book were to turn out to be an inexplicable commercial success, or, as Ugresic describes Eco's success among the nudists, "an unpredictable literary arrhythmia in the mega-pulse of the literary market." More than likely it will not -- no one has ever agreed with me that Ugresic's *Have a Nice Day* is one of the essential books about the wars in former Yugoslavia, either. But anyone interested in good writing should disregard the title of this book and read *Thank You for Not Reading*.

*Maggie Helwig is a fine one to talk, since she writes realistic fiction herself. Between Mountains, her novel about the Balkan wars and international justice, will be published in March.*

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