

From The Times

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Fiction: Baba Yaga Laid an Egg by Dubravka Ugresic

The Times review by Melissa Katsoulis

You remember Baba Yaga. She's that aggressive old crone whose woodland shack stands on chicken's feet and has human hands for door handles and severed heads for gateposts. Sometimes she has a daughter (sometimes many, sometimes none) but one thing that never changes is her grotesque appearance: huge, pendulous breasts and massive beak-like nose give her the look of womanhood dissipated, distended and perverted. Every so often, in the Slavic stories of the 18th and 19th centuries that brought her out of myth and refined her into legend, a passing knight comes asking for food and warmth. The woman in her can't help but oblige; but even this she makes foul, serving up soup swimming with children's fingers and spittle.

For Canongate's Myths series, the much-translated and multi-prize-winning novelist and essayist Dubravka Ugresic has crafted a three-part reading of this hideously compelling figure that illuminates and obscures its subject in equal measure. Parts 1 and 2 are interlinked stories set in present-day Croatia, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, concerning four old women all wrestling with the witch-stigma of old age while trying to keep their bodies, minds and chattels in a fit state to present to the public.

The first story, Go there — I Know Not Where — and Bring Me Back a Thing I Lack, concerns a tall, beaky old woman with a wig and an obsessive interest in housekeeping. She has a daughter, a writer about to leave for Sofia to take part in a literary symposium called "Golden Pen of the Balkans" (although she is quick to emphasise how much she loathes folklorists and their earnest analyses of fairytales), who tries in vain to keep her mother's life meaningful and fun as death encroaches. The two women dance around the subject of mortality while the annual murmuration of starlings makes its presence felt on the mother's balcony in New Zagreb.

The second section, Ask Me No Questions and I'll Tell You No Lies, named, like the first, after one of the riddles traditionally set by Baba Yaga to her visitors, is a more ribald affair. It centres on three elderly ladies taking a "trip of a lifetime" to a post-communist spa resort (now an overpriced Wellness Centre). Kukla and Beba are nominally looking after the oldest of their party, the foul-mouthed, clever, suicidal Pupa, who insists on keeping both feet lodged firmly in a single, oversized furry boot, even when in the swimming pool.

The younger women reluctantly try out one absurd cosmetic therapy after another but feel increasingly dejected over the state of their old bodies. When one of the three dies the other two decide, on a whim, to buy a huge wooden egg from the Easter window — display of a local craft centre, fill it with ice and pack their friend in it until they can get her body home. Add to the mix a secret child, a foundling and a foolish young man cursed with a permanent erection, plus abundant images of eggs and birds (and paintings of eggs and birds, and remembered stories about eggs and birds) and you have a concoction of babayagology that would be quite perplexing were it not for the third section of the book, which decodes it all.

Part 3 is an essay by the anagrammatic folklorist Dr Aba Bagay, analysing the previous two stories' various manifestations of the Baba Yaga myth. Important images such as feet, noses, dolls, brooms and even combs and baths are highlighted and refined to provide an even clearer lens through which to view the eternally shocking image of the housewife gone bad. For that is what old Baba Yaga is: an excommunicated, dissident version of woman who reeks of dying but never dies. And the birds that surround her, we learn, mean sex. Pecking, feather-ruffling, egg-making sex.

Dugrasic's retelling may be blisteringly postmodern in its execution but at its heart is a human warmth and even a silliness that infuses it with the sweet magic of storytelling. As the antic couplets at the end of each chapter remind us: "While life is often gloomy and cheerless, the tale runs on, bright and fearless!"