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The Power of Myths

by *Sam Munson*

February 26, 2010 | 10:16am

Two new books put a contemporary spin on age-old myths with mixed results. Sam Munson on why we can't help reinventing classics like the *Odyssey*.

The impulse to reshape the myths we inherit is as old as literary culture itself. What is the *Aeneid* if not a re-imagining of the Homeric epics? What is *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* if not a perverse and sophisticated re-furbishing of knightly legends Celtic, Gallic, and Iberian? That such refashionings have played an unignorable role in literary modernity is more or less beyond dispute—one need point only to the 20th century most titanic work of mythmaking, *Ulysses*, as evidence. Such an illustrious pedigree—alongside Joyce writers from Cervantes to Flaubert to Kafka—does not, however, mean that any attempt to produce works in this vein is *necessarily* praiseworthy.

Canongate has busied itself for some years commissioning contemporary writers, well-established and less so, to rewrite and reshape touchstones from the mythoi of wildly divergent cultures. The results are mixed: too often the books, even those by major writers like Margaret Atwood, are polemical or affected. Happily, with the arrival of the newest volume in the series, Dubravka Ugresic's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, any serious reader's faith in Canongate's project must be—at least temporarily—restored.



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The mere fact of a myth's existence is not enough to guarantee their cultural importance and permanence; it takes, after all, an Ovid to take the raw material of Olympian myth and make of it a lasting work of singular human art.

Ugresic, a Croatian living in Amsterdam, is one of the most erudite and skilled contemporary Eastern European writers. Her most recent novel, *The Ministry of Pain*, examines the perilous culture of exile; her 2003 book *Thank You for Not Reading* is a brilliant and contrarian dissection of our pathological contemporary reading habits. Her entry in the Canongate series displays all the qualities that brought her fame in her native country and throughout Europe (she is, sadly, less well-known than she deserves to be in America): a relentless and acute eye for sociocultural detail, a gift for corrosive satire, an effortless command of Europe's literary and philosophical traditions, and a perverse, lighthearted desire to toy with form. Perhaps the ideal temperament for approaching one of the most primal and complex, and ubiquitous figures in Western myth, the forest sorceress Baba Yaga. A violent, powerful, and clever old woman of vigorous appetites, Baba Yaga appears throughout European myth in various guises, as a guardian of secret knowledge, a malevolent counter-civilizational force, a minor fertility goddess appearing throughout traditional Slavic folk mythology. Ugresic has taken up all these disparate strands and woven them into a complicated story about death, sexuality, and the difficult life of women. The book's first section, a memoir or pseudomemoir about the narrator's aging mother, takes as its theme the mutual incomprehensibility of the young, the middle-aged, and the dying; the second section is a sprightly, subversive contemporary fairy tale set in a Croatian spa. The third section purports to be supposed commentary on the first two, written by a young scholar of folklore (a minor character from the first section), who explores and illuminates the various correspondences of the preceding story with the traditional myths of Baba Yaga.

Ugresic's work succeeds through its freedom from literalness, primarily: the only explicit mentions of the original material occur

in the ironic epilogue; the first two sections are very much Ugresic's own, but nonetheless close participants in the myth she is investigating. The existential terror of death incarnate in Baba Yaga's role as a communicant with the underworld finds a small-scale but no less terrifying form in the aged mother of the book's first section; the swift, absurd narratives of Baba Yaga as a giver of gifts and a uniter of virtuous but foolish young men and royal women may sound unsuitable for relocation to a decaying Adriatic spa, but Ugresic overcomes this incongruity by slyly invoking other works of Slavic modernism (and making devastating fun of Milan Kundera's erotic athleticism along the way). And Ugresic complements this structural soundness with her prose, deceptively simple, learned, and emotionally direct:

Then the war came . . . [F]oreigners, despite the rich pickings of Renaissance literature, the baroque, Modernism, the allure of the Avant-garde, even Postmodernism, latched on to folklore and would not let go. When Yugoslavia came undone, there were many disappointed . . . The lively international meetings suddenly vanished, where the šljivovica had flowed in streams and the lambs turned blithely on the spit . . . From the legends of Kraljevic Marko, they moved on to latter day legends of murderers, criminals and mafia bosses, the Serbian hero Arkan and his maiden Ceca, and the Croatian hero and playboy Ante Gotovina. The victims were of little interest to anyone.

This multifariously-aimed passage—uniting a criticism of folklorism with a perverse take on the Balkan war, simultaneously mocking the very activity Ugresic is engaged in while suggesting that myths are as real as war criminals—displays concision, true attentiveness to the resonances between mythic and contemporary history, an autocratically free and skilled hand. These qualities are what set Ugresic apart from her fellow laborers in the Canongate series, and from merely derivative writers.

A useful illustration of this rarity can be found in Zachary Mason's well-meaning but thin *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*, which purports to be a translation of a "pre-Ptolemaic papyrus" containing a series of brief vignettes making new and variegated use of themes, characters, and incidents from both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. With deliberation and care, he imitates Borges imitating the epic mode—clear, ingenuous prose, gnomic utterance—but manages to achieve neither the piercing ironies of Borges or the starkly-lit, irrefutable style of Homer, settling, instead, for well-bred rumination. The existence of books like Mason's should make us thank all the gods and goddesses for Ugresic and the rest of her slender cohort—the wise and masterful modern artists who can animate, alter, and appropriate to new purpose our distant cultural past.

Myths demand, for their survival, intelligent exegesis. This was once provided by priests and priestesses, a professional class now long in decline; then by the first major artists of the epic. The mere fact of a myth's existence is not enough to guarantee their cultural importance and permanence; it takes, after all, an Ovid to take the raw material of Olympian myth and make of it a lasting work of singular human art; Modernity has, as noted above, taken up this pursuit, but those truly gifted at it are *rara aves*, indeed.

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Sam Munson's first novel, The November Criminals, will be published in April by Doubleday.

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