

The outsider

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On the literary world's Richter scale, collections of essays barely disturb the needle. In the merciless marketplace of UK publishing, independent American imprints struggle for distribution and publicity. And in the militantly insular and chauvinist British book market, writers with funny foreign names have the sales records of, well, writers with funny foreign names. It's a bleak picture.

So, if your name is Dubravka Ugresic, your publisher is the Dalkey Archive Press from upstate New York, and you are publishing a collection of translated 'essays on the contemporary book industry', your chances of survival, let alone success, will surely be on a par with snowballs in Hell?

Wrong. Dubravka Ugresic, whose name deserves to be more widely known, is not only a gifted Yugoslav novelist, author of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, who was forced to leave her native Croatia after the publication of *The Culture of Lies* (Harvill, 1995). She is also an assured polemicist whose lucid commentary on the international, especially American, world of books is savage, quotable and perceptive.

Thank You For Not Reading (Dalkey Archive £9.99, pp224) is a volume of previously published articles by the former tutor at the Institute for the Theory of Literature at the University of Zagreb which pulls off the remarkable feat of giving cultural criticism a good name.

Ugresic, who now lives in Holland, is disenchanted with the society to which she has fled. 'The Writer in Exile' is a witty, but melancholic, anatomy of the displaced person's condition, a kind of homage to Milan Kundera. 'Exile,' writes Ugresic, 'is a literary condition; it not only gives you a rich menu of literary quotes, but is a literary quote itself.'

Hard on others, Ugresic is equally hard on herself. The exile, she admits, is 'a difficult person, a pain in the neck. He or she refuses to be domesticated.' One of her book's best qualities is its take-no-prisoners indignation. Her contempt for the inanities of contemporary publishing (mega-advances, sub-agents, book proposals and celebrity authors such as Jackie Collins all give her the pip) is salutary and, at times, thrilling.

While she conceals a thinly disguised hankering for the good old days Ugresic is emphatically not cosy. For instance:

'Some time ago, I read an interview with a writer, call her X. The most important thing, she suggested, was to become an unavoidable literary reference. X has a second-rate talent, but with the vigorous intelligence of a stockbroker... she had spoken a great, contemporary literary truth.'

Ugresic loathes globalisation, is disdainful of its apologists and yearns more or less explicitly for a unified literary culture where editors were people of discrimination and learning, where books were not published on yellowing newsprint, where bestsellers were not mistaken for literature and where 'a six-figure advance' was most likely to be an English country dance step.

Those days are gone, of course. As Ugresic puts it: 'Trivia has swamped contemporary literary life', while the current book market 'supports the democratic idea that everyone can be a writer'.

Ugresic is fascinated by the mass market. 'What,' she asks in a particularly brilliant essay, 'is the secret of the bestseller, that collective fascination with one book?' Her answer, which is whimsically derived from a summer holiday in the Adriatic in which the adjoining island was colonised by nudists reading Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, is an ironical identification of the sexlessness of Adriatic nudism with the barren formulas of the alchemists of literary success.

Scratch an exile and you usually find a cultural élitist. Ugresic is no exception, and not everyone will warm to her analysis. What saves her from being just a grumpy Croat is her sense of humour and epigrammatic style. 'You Know a Craftsman By His Tools' is a hilarious fantasy about the handbooks with which 'do-it-yourself' would-be writers must equip themselves, from '12 Things I Wish I Had Known When I Started Writing' to 'Writing From Personal Experience: How to Turn Your Life into Saleable Fiction', culminating in 'A Toolkit for Writers', which turns out to be 'a box of stiff cardboard' containing 50 cards, each with a message, viz 'consult the news', 'zoom in and out', 'switch media!' and 'breathe!'

I held my breath while I raced through this entertaining volume, hoping against hope that Dr Ugresic would sustain Thank You For Not Reading to the last page. The good news is that she does, triumphantly. But you will have to buy it to find out how.

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