

The Banality of Drivel

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THANK YOU FOR NOT READING

Essays on Literary Trivia

By Dubravka Ugresic

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No one in my curious line of work likes to be reminded how badly it meshes with the prerogatives of the industry it feeds upon, the colossus of hype, synergy and all-purpose taste-bullying that goes by the incongruously dignified handle "the publishing world." Few professions rival it for timorousness and predictability, or for the enforcement of the most sterile kind of groupthink -- an especially rich irony, since publishers are always the first, out of the other sides of their mouths, to trumpet their role as preeminent gatekeepers in our Republic of Letters, tirelessly enriching the great national traditions of freedom of thought and speech. (Do I exaggerate? Just ask Jonathan Franzen, that ungrateful, slouchy novelist who dared question the governing aesthetic of the Oprah Book Club, and so was transformed overnight into the publishing world's designated whipping boy.)

So blinding is the publishing world's hubris, so numbing its traffic in bosh and piffle, that it often simply defeats those of us who by historical accident have come to serve as its civilian interlocutors. We, too, have jobs to do, and it hardly simplifies them to be told that we are courtiers before a long succession of naked emperors.

Which, of course, is precisely why we need reminding -- and that is also why Dubravka Ugresic's "Thank You for Not Reading" is such a welcome addition to contemporary literary debate. Ugresic, a novelist and essayist from the former Yugoslavia who now divides her time between the Netherlands and the United States, records in this collection of essays her unique puzzlement over her status as an emigre writer in a borderless global economy of literary spectacle, in which market share and celebrity are the unquestioned passports to renown, and ideas and language count for less and less.

Ugresic is as suspicious of the mad tumult of Western cultural marketing as she is of the rigid literary nationalism that drove her out of her homeland,

and in these witty and sharp-eyed set pieces (usually leading off with epigrams by A.A. Milne's great naysaying donkey, Eeyore), she even dares to underline the affinities uniting the sensibilities of the old Eastern bloc with those of the Western literary market.

"Nowhere have so many muscular and healthy bodies been put on display [as in the socialist realist tradition]," she writes, "so many entwined haymakers and tractor drivers, workers and peasants, strong men and women. . . . Nowhere else was there so much faith in a bright future and the definitive victory of good over evil."

Except, that is, for the contemporary publishing scene in the West: "Most of today's literary production bases its success on the simple socialist-realist idea of progress. Bookstore counters are heaped with books which contain one single idea: how to overcome personal disability, how to improve one's own situation." Indeed, as Ugresic goes on to observe, "to be successful, market literature must be didactic. Hence the enormous number of books with the word 'How' in their titles" -- as in "How to Win Friends and Influence People," "How to Finish Your Novel" or "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," all echoing to her ears the foundational socialist-realist novel "How the Steel Was Tempered."

Like all good skeptics, Ugresic doesn't reserve her scorn only for the right-leaning canons of the market culture. She also understands that the often prostrate condition of global literary discourse proceeds directly from the glib leftist rhetoric of cultural diversity, something that sits especially badly with Ugresic's own experience of seeing the Balkans collapse into warring camps of ethnic and cultural nationalism, all placed primly beyond criticism by the metaphysics of exoticized "difference."

"The favorite European slogan -- 'unity through diversity' -- treats European 'diversity' as a repertoire of cultural stereotypes. . . . Today's global cultural bazaar is inundated with products affirming these [cultural leftist] ideological mantras and transforming them into politically correct kitsch. For example, there's the trend of self-orientalization in literature (and pop music), where artists appear on their book (or CD) covers in semi-oriental outfits like holy prophets of the postcolonial right to difference. Or the cultural products which sprang up in the course of the war in former Yugoslavia, and which contributed to the 'balkanization' of the Balkans. Yugoslav filmmakers, pop musicians, artists, and writers reached the global market more easily insofar as their products affirmed the stereotypes of the 'wild' and 'bloody' Balkans. It is hard to question this kitsch without falling into the corresponding trap of political incorrectness."

Indeed it is, but throughout "Thank You for Not Reading," Ugresic makes it

abundantly clear that her primary allegiance is not to any cluster of ideological camp followers, but rather to the far more honorable literary tradition of calling things by their true names.

She is also, unlike most higher-profile literary commentators, blessed with an ample supply of sly and self-deprecating wit, which can be savored in "Eco among the Nudists," wherein she reports that an Adriatic island full of nude sunbathers has an unerring fix on what the hot new international bestseller of any given publishing season will be, and provides an edifying inventory of the significant traits that die-hard bestseller consumers share with the clothing-optional subculture. There are also wickedly trenchant meditations on the marketing benefits of literary exile, in "How I Could Have Been Ivana Trump and Where I Went Wrong" and in a Top 10 list of reasons to be a Croatian writer (Reasons 8 and 9: "Because of sex" and "Because of sex, again").

"Thank You for Not Reading," in short, is the ideal clothing accessory for the fool's paradise of bestsellerdom in our time. Be sure to look it up soon, before the market dispatches it to the remainder tables.