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**Joan Collins and the decline of the west**

Julian Evans

"The writer and his reader are more isolated than ever," declares Dubravka Ugresic on the first page of these "essays on literary trivia", as she subtitles them. The book arose from a conflict between two feelings, she writes, that "self-respecting writers should not write about things that wise people prefer not to discuss" and then that, on the contrary, self-respecting writers should never try to be too wise.

This intellectual spat with herself has produced a fast-moving, brilliant compendium of reflections and polemics about contemporary literary culture; a book to be compared with, perhaps preferred to, Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. It also made me laugh out loud on at least a dozen occasions.

Ugresic is a considerable voice of Balkan dissent. She is Croatian but went into self-imposed exile after Croatia's president, Franjo Tudjman, proclaimed Croatia to be "Paradise on Earth" in the early 1990s. In an earlier collection of essays, *The Culture of Lies*, she roamed ferociously over the nationalist manias of Balkan politicians, but did not spare the intellectual complacency of the rest of Europe.

The arguments of this book seem to be directed at more rarefied targets - writing, writers, the publishing industry. What wise people prefer not to discuss with respect to these matters came, I suspect, as a great shock to her when she left Croatia. The first essay here relates her attendance about 10 years ago at the London book fair, the year it was opened by Joan Collins. Collins appeared, "dressed like a quotation: in a little pink Chanel suit, with a pink pillbox hat on her head and a coquettish veil over her eyes ... What does all this have to do with literature?"

This was when she began to realise that literary life had become swamped by its epiphenomena, that books' blurbs and author photographs had become more important than their content, that the industry was overrun by middlemen and women whom writers had to pay for, that bookstores resembled supermarkets whose fruit and vegetables had mutated and lost their flavour in favour of external appearance. She contrasts this situation with that of the torcedores, the cigar-rollers, in Cuba's tobacco factories, where they hire readers to read to the workers. "The listeners in my Cuban fantasy are not passive ... Their literary taste is as sharp as a razor, they react to every badly used word, to every false note."

Having set out her territory, her arguments take flight. In another essay, "Alchemy", she writes that "The greatest shock for an east European writer who turned up in the western literary marketplace was the absence of aesthetic criteria." The easterner, brought up to believe in a distinction between "literature" and "trash", is introduced to a westerner and admits modestly that he is a writer. "What a coincidence!" the reply comes. "Our 10-year-old daughter is just finishing a novel. We even have a publisher!" This is the first insult in a series that makes him understand that the best way to be published is to make sure he has done something else to become famous for first: to be Joan Collins or Ivana Trump; a prostitute, murderer or model. An art-dealer friend reminds the author about Piero Manzoni's artwork, "Artist Shit", sold at the price of gold in 1961. While the price of gold has remained more or less stable in the past 40 years, he tells her, the price of shit has seen astronomical growth.

These are not narrow matters. The theme of ever-widening cultural uniformity surfaces in a number of her arguments. In "Come Back, Cynics, All is Forgiven!" she offers a potent analysis of the current over-valuation of "ordinary accounts of ordinary people about ordinary things". "The only thing that puzzles me," she notes, "in this ardent return to reality, is reality itself" - a reality soapified, literalised, commodified, globalised. "The living Oprah is a mega-metaphor for the contemporary fetishisation of spontaneity and sincerity ... Even the Croatian minister of defence, having happily

avoided The Hague tribunal, was buried to the song 'Candle in the Wind'." A new fascism dawns, based on obedience to worldwide market-based norms of ordinariness and sincerity. As she says, no wonder there are walls in many parts of eastern Europe graffitied with the words "Come back, communists, all is forgiven!"

It is hard in a short space to do justice to the sparkling, Flaubertian satire and profound anthropological quality of these essays. I have not touched on, for example, her very moving essay on "The Writer in Exile", or her denunciation of optimism, or one of the best essays in the book, "Long Live Socialist Realism!", in which she shows how the "joyous art" of Soviet times has its counterpart in the supposed healing effect of American bestsellers with the word "How" in the title: Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* meets Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. The result is a publishing industry producing entertaining, accessible books for everyone. Disobedient writers are ignored, eventually integration into the global fold fills us with joy. Are we having fun yet? We sure are.

But for now, let it be Ugresic who provides it. She is a writer, and this is a book, to be treasured.