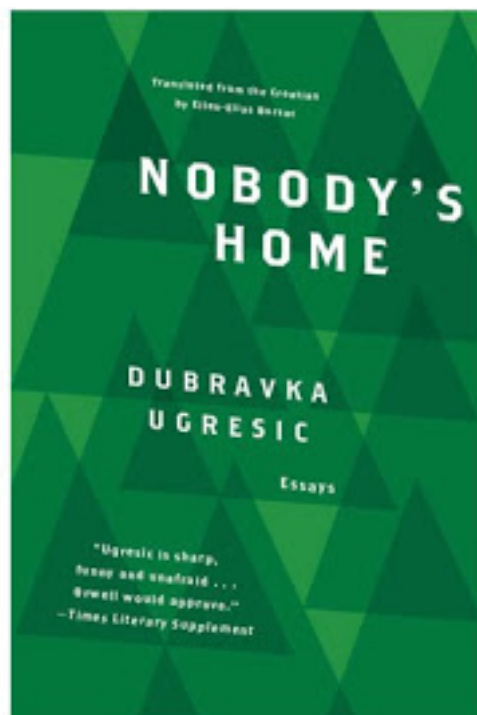


C A L Q U E
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Croatian Anticharlatanism



Nobody's Home
by Dubravka Ugrešić
Translated from the Croatian by
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Open Letter Books,

Introduction

On her website Dubravka Ugrešić describes herself as possessed by the spirit of Dorothy's Toto from *The Wizard of Oz*, who is always daring Ugrešić to tug back the curtain and expose the Wizard for the charlatan that he is. The Toto factor combined with her fascination with the issues associated with the transnational movements of people, displacement and exile, and the resulting interplay and mingling of cultures propel her newest book of essays, *Nobody's Home*.

Her interest in displacement ranges from human trafficking to the trend of Western Europeans snapping up vacation homes for a song in what used to be Eastern Europe. The Toto factor keeps her showing us that things are not as they seem.

Dubravka Ugrešić comes by her interest in displacement honestly. After the breakout of war in the early 1990s, Ugrešić moved into voluntary exile from Croatia, spurred by her defiance of the nationalist regimes dividing Yugoslavia. She spent this decade as a visiting lecturer at universities in Europe and the United States, until she finally settled to live and write in Amsterdam. *Nobody's Home* is her fourth book of essays. She has also published three novels and two books of short stories in English.

After Yugoslavia was patched together in 1918 the country oscillated between a more liberal system and repression. Any swing toward greater democracy was followed by an upsurge in separatist nationalist movements. In 1971, for instance, when Dubravka Ugrešić was a student at Zagreb University, there was a push toward a more liberal socialist regime in Croatia coupled with vociferous Croatian nationalism, immediately repressed by Tito's government. The same happened in Serbia in the 1980s during the liberalization that followed Tito's death, leading this time to the wars of the 1990s.

In her work published before the outbreak of war in 1991, three collections of short stories and a novel, Dubravka Ugrešić's poetic was one of a cosmopolitan post-modernism. The virulence of the nationalist rhetoric was antithetical to everything that mattered to her, nor was she of any use as a voice to the rising regime. The essays that she wrote at the start of the war, sharply critical of the harnessing of literature and culture to the nationalist cause, quickly made her a scapegoat in public life. Her telephone number was even published four times in the press as active encouragement for people to hound her, which they did.

Dubravka Ugrešić has always written in Croatian, and, with the exception of a few titles which came out first in translation during the early 1990s, she publishes her work first in Zagreb before it appears abroad. Even while she was still a public anathema her books sold as soon as they appeared in the Zagreb bookstores,

though the titles seldom appeared on the bestseller lists.

The essays in *Nobody's Home* are wry, and peppered with little stories. In fact the stories and anecdotes she uses to make her point take her essays to the brink of fiction. For instance in a short piece, "Identity", the narrator claims a powerful allergic reaction to the word "identity", probably due to over-exposure. Her community as it embarks on war calls on her to commit to an identity. She refuses to change her self-definition from "Yugoslav" to "Croatian" or "Serbian" or anything else. Ironically, to flee these demands she needs a passport, yet another label. And she cannot get away by simply being a writer; she is quickly labeled by the rest of the world a Croatian writer. In quick succession she juxtaposes four identity-related stories: a hairdresser whose identity it is to cut hair in the nude, Madonna with her mantra *Express yourself!*, a Japanese bestseller with the sentence: *Come let me introduce you to my mother who used to be my father!*, and Linda Evangelista whose sentiment: I have no *Identity!* was referring, it turns out, to a perfume. She concludes that people hold on fiercely to their identity precisely because they know that it can easily be changed, and she calls for a shift to the notion of: integrity. While identities, as she explains, are interchangeable like passports, integrities are not.

Nobody's Home is organized in five parts. The first part consists of shorter essays such as "Identity". The other sections have longer pieces, which interweave a complex palette of narrative voices, some tender and humorous, others cutting and critical.

In "Amsterdam, Amsterdam" Dubravka Ugrešić examines Dutch life with affection interlaced with the occasional mildly critical observation. Cities are like coats, the protagonist explains, then describes Amsterdam as a doll's house, a city of diminutives. When the fog rolls in, says the protagonist, Amsterdam is in the thrall of cats. She describes the perils of being a pedestrian in Amsterdam with the ubiquitous cyclists, and describes the moment when after many years of living in the Netherlands she finally understands the importance of the bicycle to the Dutch. She is on a plane, coming in to land at Schiphol Airport. She looks out the window and is struck by the fragility of the Netherlands. Only the bicycle is light enough not to harm it. She is choked with sadness and has ever since been tiptoeing around on the Amsterdam streets as if walking on eggs. On a more sober note she realizes with a shock, after visiting the Anne Frank Museum, that in the version of the Diary that she read as a child it was never clear that Anne had actually died in the camp where she was incarcerated. The protagonist offers her final metaphor for Holland as a homely Dutch treat, the *gevulde koekje*, which, with its plain exterior hides a rich marzipan heart.

At the other end of the spectrum are her biting, Toto-driven essays such as, "A Postcard from My Vacation," about a visit to the site of a former prison camp in Croatia. The story/essay describes a writer who visits the camp, Goli Otok, with a group of fellow-writers. As they tour the grounds, it turns out that some of the members of the tour were incarcerated there during the time when the island was

either a political prison for pro-Stalinists in the 1950s, or a more ordinary prison in the later years. One of the former prisoners had moved afterwards to Australia and was back for the first time. The protagonist observes that as the former prisoners describe what their life had been like they seem almost joyous. Indeed, one of them bursts into song to show what they had been forced to sing as they did their hard labor, and he throws himself with gusto into the singing. They tell of how the prisoners taunted and informed on one another and expose the complexities of camp life. During their tour the group comes upon the set for a pornographic movie. The government, it seems, has been renting out the former prison as a location for making porn. The group reconvenes at the tourist shop where there are miniature versions of cudgels and other torture instruments to purchase as souvenirs. Despite these distractions, the horror of the camp propels the protagonist into a panic attack. She muses on how everyone is out to extract a profit from the past except the victims, and leaves us with an image of Goli Otok inmates, forced to stand and shield from the baking sun with their shadows the saplings they have planted in the island's barren rocky soil.

Nobody's Home takes the reader on a transnational tour of the world, showing us the mingling of people and places. In a New York nail salon the essayist watches the Vietnamese proprietor instruct his fledgling Mexican beautician how to do nails. She watches Europe flit by through the windows of a train like a slide show of attitudes, prejudices, and nostalgia. When she sets the beeper off as she is leaving a store where she's been shopping in Stockholm, the kindly saleswoman suggests it might be her cellphone or an iPod. When it is neither, she tells the protagonist: "Relax, all the foreigners are beeping."

Dubravka Ugreshić lends us her wry, thoughtful gaze, her way of seeing things we thought we knew.

—Ellen Elias-Bursać

Ellen Elias-Bursać has translated works by several writers from the former Yugoslavia, including David Albahari's *Götz and Meyer*, for which she was awarded the ALTA National Translation Award in 2006. She also received the AATSEEL Award in 1998 for her translation of Albahari's *Words Are Something Else*.