

Dubravka Ugresic

A defender of women's rights and a brilliant journalist.

By [Clive James](#) | Posted Friday, April 6, 2007, at 12:47 PM



*The following essay is adapted from Clive James' [Cultural Amnesia](#), a re-examination of intellectuals, artists, and thinkers who helped shape the 20th century. **Slate** is publishing an [exclusive selection](#) of these essays, going roughly from A to Z.*

One hot summer's day I stopped in the New York subway hypnotized by what I saw. A middle-aged couple was dancing an Argentinian tango, describing around them an invisible circle in which only the two of them existed, the man and the woman, and a dusty cassette player on the ground beside them. The man and the woman were neither ugly nor beautiful, neither young nor old. They were dressed in black, their clothes were tidy but worn, the man's black trousers shone with a greasy sheen. They danced seriously, modestly, without emotion, without superfluous movements, with no desire to please ... —
Dubravka Ugresic, The Culture of Lies.



Dubravka Ugresic

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Dubravka Ugresic (b. 1949) might have been put on earth for the specific purpose of reminding us that there is nothing simple about the Balkans. She was born in Croatia into a family of mixed ethnic origin, with a Bulgarian mother. She spent time at Zagreb's forbiddingly named Institute for the Theory of Literature. A graduate of Moscow State University, she did academic work on the Russian avant-garde. In 1993, she left Croatia, staying first in Holland and Berlin before taking up a succession of posts in American universities, among them Wesleyan and UCLA. Her novels, which I have not yet read, are usually described as the work of a writer's writer, or perhaps of someone who has been to the Institute for the Theory of Literature in Zagreb. One of them has, at least in English translation, the best title of the 20th century's twilight years: *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Her journalism, which I have read with respect, despair, and delight, is essentially a refusal to surrender to the historically determined chaos of the area where she was born and grew up. As brave as Oriana

Fallaci ever was but less burdened by ideology (so far she has not stuck herself with any large theories that she might need to repudiate, except possibly for the Theory of Literature), Ugresic is unbeatable at explaining the inexplicable entanglements of Balkan cultural traditions, particularly as they relate to the hellish position of women.

This is what the tango can give you: an atoll of bliss in a sea of turmoil. Just to watch it, let alone dance it, is a holiday from the accidental, and a free pass into the realm where the inevitable, for once, looks good. The dance is beautiful all by itself: The dancers don't have to be, and in the passage they obviously aren't. Ugresic goes on to ask rhetorically why a couple of tango dancers can make hard-bitten New Yorkers, who would otherwise hurry past, stop to watch and miss their trains. She deduced that they were being taken out of themselves. It was true for her. Like the moment it describes, the passage is an interlude made doubly sweet by what the rest of life is like. Her book is a cautionary tale for anyone who might think he can guess something about the Balkans without having been there. *The Culture of Lies* is really a collection of observations, many of them focused on the official abuse of language: the ghost in the background is Karl Kraus. What Kraus did for Austria and Germany in the pre-Nazi period, Ugresic does for Croatia in the Tadjman period, with the Bosnia of Milosevic looming in the wings; and she does it at least as well. Ugresic's measures of normality, unlikely though it may seem, lie in the vanished Yugoslavia of Tito. For her, Yugoslavia lingers in the mind and heart as the dreamed reality, whereas Croatia is the living nightmare. Tito's iron hand at least kept the ethnic minorities from each other's throats. The new iron hands want something else, and throats are their first target. Their second target, however, is the one that fascinates her, for reasons that become steadily more obvious.

Whatever faction a man represents, the uninvited penetration of a woman seems to be his main reassurance of personal power. Beside and scarcely below the threat of murder, rape becomes a part of a woman's life expectancy. It is hard to think of another book in which a climate of casual violence incubates such a lucid concern for women's rights. Nadezhda Mandelstam's two books of memoirs add up to the great 20th-century record of everyday frightfulness, but Nadezhda wasn't thinking about women's rights. She probably found Alexandra Kollontai absurd. Kollontai campaigned for women's rights to be granted by a state dedicated to the principle that nobody of either sex had any rights at all. Nadezhda would have been glad to have the old repressions back, and male chauvinism along with them.

But Ugresic is in a different place, a different time, and a different frame of mind. She knows what has come true for women in the West and is ready to blame the whole mess in her country exclusively on the strutting male. She calls him "Yugo-man" and sometimes the "Yugomaniac." She makes a very convincing job of it. Whether Serb, Croat, Slav, Muslim, Bosnian this, or Herzegovinian that, all the men in the book carry on like wild animals whenever they see a skirt. She doesn't make enough of one of the saddest facts of all, perhaps because it didn't fully emerge until much later: Muslim women who had been gang-raped by Serbian men were scared to tell the Muslim men, lest they be punished for having submitted to dishonor. Apart from that, however, her readiness to distribute her scorn evenly makes her the writer she is, and surely she is one of the most interesting to come out of Eastern Europe in modern times. (Ugresic attended the trial of Milosevic, and I can hardly wait to see what she writes about it.) She comes from one of what Kundera memorably called the Kidnapped Countries, and she has given it its voice, which is

the voice of a woman. The woman carries plastic bags full of the bad food and the thin supplies she has queued for by the hour while the men sit around in the square scratching their crotches and dreaming up their next war. In the course of their dimwitted conversations, the men refer to any given woman as a cunt. The twin functions of the cunt are to put dinner on the table and lie down when required. Most male readers will find this an uncomfortable prospect, as they are meant to.