

Exiled debunker of a dangerous mythology

Miriam Cosic

DUBRAVKA Ugresic knows first-hand about myth. The Croatian writer comes from a part of the world where mythology colonises and dominates the psychological, cultural and political texture of life with dreadful regularity.

She was run out of her home town for her opposition to the manufacture of nationalist mythology in countries of the former Yugoslavia, for her pacifist and feminist opposition to the wars of the 1990s which that mythology fed.

Croat nationalists even tried to sideline her voice by claiming she wasn't a real Croat because her mother was Bulgarian.

"Who cares who is my mother and who is my father?" she asks rhetorically. "And why would that give me more balance or more aversion towards the question?"

"This is the humiliation of human reason -- as if only Australian people could write about Australians, or only Australians could understand Australia. It is not true: we all have the capacity to think, and to judge."

Ugresic is speaking by telephone from Amsterdam, where she lives. Her conversation, on the eve of a trip to the Sydney Writers Festival, is dense with a lifetime of reading and rigorous thinking, but leavened with wry asides about the irrationalities of

humanity.

She is, in short, the best kind of eastern European intellectual: one of the few who escaped being co-opted by nationalism or falling into irrelevance when "democracy" -- she often parenthesises the word in her sharply observed essays -- swept through the formerly communist states.

Ugresic is one of the writers British publisher Canongate asked to reinterpret traditional myths in a contemporary vein. Having specialised in comparative and Russian literature when a student, and later as an academic at the University of Zagreb, she has written one of the richer contributions. She chose the Russian myth of Baba Yaga, a wildly picturesque character: a witch who lives in a house built on chicken legs.

The title of the book, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, is borrowed from Russian author Alexei Remizov. In the first part, the narrator travels to Sofia for her seriously unwell Bulgarian mother; the second is a happy-ever-after farce about three elderly women who blow their savings on a week in a luxurious Czech spa; and the third is a pseudo-scholarly treatise on the Baba Yaga stories.

The shifts in mood between them are striking, but leitmotifs, such as birds, and the theme of ageing bind them.

"The first one is the most intimate part," Ugresic says, "and it has documentary value because I put myself into the position of observing my mother's ageing and sickness, a painful and intimate confrontation. The second one is totally different; it's cheerful, it's playing with the genre of the fairytale. And the third part is the cerebral part, where I enjoyed very much reading the symbolism of Baba Yaga's possible meanings."

The witch trope has run throughout her writing, particularly the political essays in which she discusses the warmongering

masculinity of Balkan societies and the use of rape in war, and has been used against her. She was one of the "five witches", as they were called, intellectuals, all women, who were accused of betraying Croatia in their writing during the 90s. "I often wonder how it happened that I changed from being a writer to being a 'public enemy'," she wrote in a 1994 essay, *Profession: Intellectual*.

Ugresic was born in Putine, a small town near Zagreb. She had the typical childhood of a writer, she says: "I was an outsider, a big reader, and I tried to write when I was very young." In high school she edited a newspaper supplement for children.

After graduating from university she spent an eye-opening year in Moscow. "It was one of the most interesting years in my life," she says. "I wouldn't know anything without that experience of one totalitarian year.

"It was all extremely exciting, exploring this samizdat, underground cultural life, real danger. It was quite different for me; in that respect, I was a Western girl behind the Iron Curtain."

This urgent and secretive fellowship of intellectuals didn't exist in Yugoslavia. "We did have a few dissidents, public figures like Milovan Djilas, and we did have a few incidents, especially in the film industry, where a few people were censored, a few films were banned. But we didn't have an underground in that sense because the Yugoslav borders were opened in the 60s."

Instead of presenting a united front against totalitarian repression, Yugoslav literature was rippled by fashions: hyper-realistic prose in Serbia, Borgesian magic realism in Croatia. "The biggest issue was the literariness of literature, how to make literary text," she says. "We didn't want to be involved in politics, politics was something dirty that didn't deserve literature."

And then came the war.

Critics say there is a watershed in Ugresic's style, before and after the beginning of the war. The writing before is more formally experimental, more playful, the writing after more deadly earnest, an ongoing polemic in favour of neutrality and rationality. Ugresic herself is not so sure.

"Of course, I was influenced by everything that happened in Yugoslavia . . . [but] you would not quite be sure saying where the author lives and what are his experiences reading, let's say, my book of essays, Thank You for Not Reading, or Baba Yaga Laid an Egg."

Even in her most clearly political book, *The Culture of Lies*, Ugresic remains writerly. The structure of some of the essays is idiosyncratic: numbered paragraphs, for example, give the impression of a scientific treatise, even where she most passionately urges readers to see through the spin of those emerging Balkan nations, especially her own.

For although she doesn't give the belligerent Serbs any comfort, she seems to believe criticism begins at home, that it is one's own country and elected regime one is responsible for. She tried her best, in her world of letters, to break the region's eternally murderous cycle of claiming victimhood for oneself, then using that to justify the murder of one's enemies.

"All big identity systems, like religion or nationality, are machines for manipulation," she says, "because in the end you are just a human being and nothing else."

Even names, those inescapable markers in multi-ethnic places, are unreliable, she points out: "It's a joke, because people think they know by name who is who, but throughout history, thanks to promiscuity, people can't really tell."

She mentions a Serbian friend living in Berlin whose surname is Solomon. A great-great-grandfather, living in a 19th-century town where Jewish merchants were respected for their reliability, changed his name for commercial advantage. World War II must have brought considerable chagrin for his descendants.

After what now seems a positively idyllic time of unity under Marshall Tito, ethnic identity forced itself again on people such as Ugresic, criticised by nationalists for indulging in "Yugo-nostalgia".

"These are not my problems at all," she says drily. "But when there is a general issue, then as a writer you respond. And I responded in my way."

She received death threats when she criticised the Croatian regime in the early 90s: anonymous messages were left on her answering service, notes pushed into her letterbox. She stood it for as long as she could.

In 1993, when she was 44, she left, and she experienced intensely all the emotional effects of exile: fear, anxiety, the sense of being alone in the world.

Time lessened those feelings, she says: "In order to keep exile alive you have to keep a notion of home alive. I don't live within those categories any more: home-exile. I don't feel the sharpness of them any more."

Listening to Ugresic, it seems memory might be a place, absent the notion of home, where she might live. Again, the scepticism. "Memory plays tricks with you, as you know perfectly well, starting with false memory syndrome," she replies. "So something that could be a comfort zone, a world of memories, could also be a traumatic zone."

That, perhaps, is what myth gives us: an ability to approach the past without pretending that memory is reliable.

"I think we all believe [memory] is reliable," Ugresic says, "otherwise we will all go crazy. If you try to deconstruct every detail, then you will see that behind every detail is some lie. I'm talking about history too. We accept things as we are told they are, because this is the most secure way to live.

"But I got my lesson. I experienced all those lies during the war in Yugoslavia. I experienced the way history is written and rewritten, how you make your heroes. I saw everything.

"Which is not going to be the case for my little nephew in Zagreb, because for him it will be firm history. He won't have experienced how it was manipulated. The new history is already in the school books and institutionalised."

And you realise Ugresic is right back there, in the Zagreb she left, questioning the spin, knowing she can't win, a voice now in her Dutch wilderness.

And yet humour infuses her work despite all she has been through intellectually and personally. It is finely observant, ironic and ultimately forgiving.

"As a writer, I'm always afraid of monologue, of totalitarian speech, of the author who knows everything," she says. "You can break that with humour. That's why humour is irreplaceable. It's like love, you can't fake it."

Dubravka Ugresic will be a guest of the Sydney Writers Festival this week.