

The Rumpus International Rivers Interview #2: Dubravka Ugresic on the Danube

Michael Zelenko January 8th 2009

Born in the former Yugoslavia (present-day Croatia) Dubravka Ugresic began her career writing children's television programs and books. In nearly four decades of writing and editing, she has published books on Russian contemporary fiction, edited anthologies of Russian avant-garde writing, translated texts into Croatian, written more than half a dozen books and published countless articles in European and American magazines. As Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 90s, nationalist fervor erupted. Dubravka Ugresic's firm anti-nationalist stance exposed her to public harassment: she was labeled a "traitor" and "public enemy" by the press. Ugresic left Croatia in 1993 and currently resides in the Netherlands.

Reading Ugresic's latest collection of essays, *Nobody's Home* is bearing witness to a beautifully articulate curiosity: Ugresic questions nationalism, multiculturalism, Eastern European authors ('Easties'), celebrities, immigration, capitalism and more. The essays—rigorous and opinionated—smuggle concepts that snag readers with their clarity and originality. In speaking of confronting her Eastern European identity, Ugresic writes:

"Can someone explain to me how it could be that—having come to the West from the South of Europe, from the former Yugoslavia—I look more and more, with every new day, like—a woman from India?!Columbus' gaffe is proliferating. I went westward and turned up in the East. Moving from East Amsterdam to West Amsterdam didn't help either: in doing so I found myself even further eastwards".

Baba Yaga Laid An Egg (2009), her latest work of nonfiction, was published as part of Canongates' Myth Series. The book is a three-forked approach to Baba Yaga, the infamous witch of Eastern Europe. Ugresic addresses this myth and touches on a few others with a lighter touch than in her nonfiction—though the essayist's head inevitably emerges.

The following interview was conducted in the fall of 2009.

The Rumpus: How did you get involved in the Myths project and what attracted you to Baba Yaga?

Dubravka Ugresic: I was invited to propose "my" myth and do the synopsis. I chose Baba Yaga without thinking twice, and when the editorial board of Canongate's myth project accepted it, I found myself in trouble. But when I look at my choice retrospectively, it was not only a right choice; it was an absolutely precise choice. It had its long history, only I had forgotten about it. Even the title of book, for instance, was fixed some thirty years earlier than the book was actually written. In that respect, and in some other respects, Baba Yaga is not departure from my works, but the opposite. Writing Baba Yaga was a sort of reunion with my earlier writing style. If you read my early collection of short stories *Lend Me Your Character*, you will find a similar literary energy.

Rumpus: After reading *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg* I was surprised to read that you yourself had been labeled a "witch"—that they'd decided to use this very specific term. Even if your decision

to take on Baba Yaga was impulsive, did the project give you the opportunity to appropriate the insult?

Ugresic: We—I, and other four women, three of them journalists and one of them a university professor—have been labeled “witches,” “traitors,” “people’s enemies,” “conspirators against Croatia” etc. because each of us wrote critically about Croatian and Serbian nationalism. This media witch hunt started in 1992 and went on for some time. It also opened a “production” of “inside enemies” in Croatia. The witch-hunt practice and hysterical nationalism were the reasons I left Croatia.

A history of female intelligentsia shows that women thinkers were often perceived as “witches” and publicly discredited as witches. When Mohammad was mocked in a Danish newspaper several years ago, a million of people stood up to defend His right not to be mocked. Hundreds of thousands of girls have been raped, sold to brothels and enslaved; hundred of thousands women burned, raped, molested—and nobody, except some activist groups, have stood up to defend their rights. When the Pope died, millions of ordinary people cried for the old man and even rushed to Rome to cry there. When Anna Politkovskaya was murdered, a few stood up to the Russian authorities demanding the murderers be brought to justice. In the meantime, another woman journalist was murdered. A dust is slowly covering those cases. These are the standards of the world we live in, and we can’t do anything about it.

I am not interested to write about my case. Others should write about it, if anyone would ever be interested to write about it.

Rumpus: You’ve written before about the forced fracturing of languages during the break up of Yugoslavia. Did myths go through a similar process?

Ugresic: They did. When everything breaks apart, as it happened with the former Yugoslavia, then language, history, values, literature, ideology and mythology—as an important part of “house furniture”—break apart too. Yugoslav socialist mythology, with its heroes, personalities, ideas and ideals, was vandalized, very often literally (destruction of monuments, libraries, and churches, for instance). Old myths were replaced by new national and nationalistic myths. Their function was pragmatic: such myths were supposed to reinforce the differences between the Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians; to give “reason” and “legality” to the war, to transform criminal acts into heroic ones. Mythologization served as a sort of huge laundry machine, to wash the dirt; a sort of collective psychotherapy. Instead of truth and real reason for the war, new ideologues offered people myths.

Rumpus: In *Nobody’s Home* you argue that “themes of exile, passports, and visas will gradually vanish from the Eastie’s (Eastern European author’s) repertoire.” As Europe unifies, is the “Eastie’s” identity in peril?

Ugresic: The new Eastie, at least the part I know best, is in trouble. The old system fell apart and our Eastie, in order to survive, had to transform himself and adapt to a new one. However, one can’t transform him or herself without consequences. That’s why the typical Eastie is a liar: he uses one language when he speaks to his local audience and another when he speaks to an international audience. He is doing this job of self-positioning in order to survive.

Rumpus: But does the Eastie generate this situation for his own profit or is he a victim of a system beyond his control?

Ugresic: He is not a victim, not at all. He is an active participant of a post-communist, “democratic” life. If you check media, newspapers, publishing houses, and universities in Eastern European countries, you will see that some former dissidents (those who survived) are now in power; that many writers got as much power as they could. Some of them are newspaper owners; some own publishing houses; some have their own TV-shows, radio-programs, regular newspaper columns, and so on and so forth. I would say that the Eastie generates this situation for his own profit.

Rumpus: What language do you write in?

Ugresic: I write in BCS. This funny abbreviation was coined by the translators who work at The Hague Tribunal, and stands for Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian. I didn’t change the language I write in—when I found myself in exile I was too old to change languages. I don’t have any romantic ideas about the mother tongue. I think that young writers can, in many respects, only profit from switching to another, bigger language.

Rumpus: In all your work, but especially in your essays, your writing is argumentative and opinionated. Do you picture the readers you’re writing for?

Ugresic: From the moment I left the country, I can’t picture my readers anymore. It’s a blind date, so to say. But the writer’s life is full of paradoxes, such as: The more distant the reader, the better the understanding! I have a better chance of being properly understood by a literary, educated American reader than by a similar reader in my former country. Why? Because nationalism is like a pesticide: its poison lasts longer than one season and it penetrates everywhere—into literature, culture, and consequently into its reception.

Rumpus: On the topic of nations and language: you’re an outspoken opponent of right-wing nationalism. But you also question the concept of ‘multiculturalism.’ Is there a connection between the two?

Ugresic: I’ve never heard about left-wing nationalism, but it is possible that in today’s ideological mess such a concept exists. In any case nationalism, be it right or left, is in my view is only a euphemism for fascism. Multiculturalism sprung up from nationalism, as it’s opposite. There is nothing wrong with the concept, but it is too often misused and abused in practice. In practice the culture of “Other” is often taken as an excuse for our indifference and our inverted chauvinism. The “Other” is no better in this respect either: he often uses his “culture” as an excuse to perpetuate rigidity, unwillingness to change and accept different standards.

For instance, if three Turkish brothers, German citizens, kill their “over-emancipated” sister, they would in their defense point to their “culture,” their “ethnic habits,” their “family pride.” The police would not tolerate the murder, of course, but would read the crime as part of their (Turkish) “culture,” their “ethnic habits,” all in all with “understanding.” Politically correct respect for the culture of the Other is often just a mask for a total indifference towards the Other.

Rumpus: Could you describe the last time you saw the Danube?

Ugresic: I see it every time I visit Budapest, and that is always the most impressive view. The most amusing occasion was in Vienna some time ago. It was summer and the banks of the Danube were full of little improvised open restaurants where people were dancing salsa. People living in Vienna, locals and emigrants, were crazy about salsa that summer. That added to the Danube—I mean to the Danube as a cultural text—a totally new, refreshing meaning.