

Steve Silk, *Leaving A Violent Homeland For The Shallow New World*. Hartford Courant May 14, 1995.

Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream

By Dubravka Ugresic, Viking, \$21.95, 241 pp.

Dubravka Ugresic says she came to the United States from "a country which does not yet exist. . . in a country which no longer exists." It was a move that proved wrenching and unsettling, even alienating. For America, the land of dreams, also had a few nightmares of its own, even when compared with Croatia, in the former Yugoslavia.

Ugresic's disorienting stint in the United States, part of which was spent as a visiting professor at Wesleyan University in Middletown during the spring semester of 1992, inspired this collection of personal essays. At Wesleyan, Ugresic lectured on Eastern and Central European novels and Russian avant-garde literature.

In brief, reflective works with telegraphic titles such as "Refugee," "Shrink," "Jogger" "Couch-potato" and "Body," the author makes wry, ironic observations on the glittering cultural quirks of the United States and on the shadowy darkness that envelopes her homeland, a darkness whose strangling tendrils she cannot escape, even half a world away in Middletown.

"I see myself as a passenger traveling with an enormous amount of luggage, a passenger trying desperately to get rid of his burden, but it drags tenaciously after him like destiny itself," she writes.

Weighted down by the profound horrors of an emerging Croatia, Ugresic finds the airy preoccupations of American culture odd indeed, even though she sometimes succumbs to their seductive allure.

The American cult of the body inspires one of her best and most horrifying essays. She begins by deconstructing TV ads that, she writes, articulate and nurture the fundamental substance of American life -- a quest for cleanliness, a healthy bowel and a hot body. The allure is potent enough to lead Ugresic to acquire a thigh master, a NordicTrack, a refrigerator full of Slim-Fast and a regular course of aerobics.

Soon though, her Old World self rebels at the cult of the perfect body.

"I come from a country in which the body is just a cheap target," she writes. "All ex-Yugoslavs are today merely meat. The fact that some perish as Croats, others as Serbs, and others again as Muslims, does not count for much."

In the end, her twinned realities blur; Ugresic decides to be cremated upon her death, and to have her ashes placed in the hands of one Roger Papazian of Rocky Hill, who will use them to fill a bullet. Then, she writes, "I, an incorrigibly idle slob, will at last have a satisfactory body: slim, light, seductive, aerodynamic and dangerous." Where the bullet

goes is of no consequence.

Many of Ugresic's goggle-eyed musings result from seeing the world simultaneously through two opposing viewpoints. But because the contrasts create a sharper relief, she is able to bring both into tight focus. Each American-inspired topic from contact to Coca-Cola has its shadowy doppelganger, a dark Balkan twinning -- an ad for a pearl necklace here conjures visions of a slit throat there.

“Everything is mixed up in my head, everything exists simultaneously, nothing has just one meaning anymore, nothing is firm any longer, not the earth, not the frontiers, not people, not houses. . . . Everything is so fragile it seems it will shatter any minute.”