

Context 22

Interview with Dubravka Ugresic

Jessa Crispin

Dubravka Ugresic is not one to shy away from controversy. After she wrote her inflammatory book *Thank You For Not Reading*, a series of essays on the state of the publishing industry, she continued her controversial streak by calling the *Believer's Snarkwatch* "Stalinist," and in an interview with the *Boston Globe* she referred to Stephen King's National Book Award as "a Fall of the Literary Wall: a final unification, not of good and bad literature but of literature and trash." Ugresic, who currently divides her time between the Netherlands and America, was interviewed via e-mail by Jessa Crispin. This interview first appeared on *Bookslut.com*

JESSA CRISPIN: The New York Times has just announced they'll be reviewing less literary fiction in order to focus on "airport" fiction. Do you think this is a surprising move? How do you think this will affect publishing?

DUBRAVKA UGRESIC: An airport is the most common metaphor for our contemporary world, for its mobile part. Airports are becoming big shopping malls. And more: in Dutch Schiphol Airport you can find many things, even a small mosque in case you get an urge to leave a message on Allah's answering machine.

A dream (or nightmare) of many writers is to see their books in the airport bookstores. The New York Times's announcement sounds like a realization of that airport metaphor. Airport people are supposed to buy *The New York Times* in the airport newspaper stands, to read book reviews on airport fiction, and then buy that fiction in the airport bookstores.

All in all, it's not a surprising move. The publishing industry behaves like any other industry, and the book is treated like any other product.

Within that reality there are some exceptions. There is a small airport in North Carolina, Raleigh-Durham, with a secondhand bookstore. A couple of years ago I found good books for low prices there. I hope that this secondhand bookstore is still there.

JC: You write that globalization is really just Americanization, and that America has little interest in the rest of the world. Do you think translated literature will ever have a place in American publishing?

DU: Why do you think that other countries have more interest in the rest of the world than America does? Do you think that Germany has a special interest in Bulgarian culture? No. But statistically Germany has a bigger interest in American culture than America has in German culture. American mass media are the strongest in the world: they are the magnet which attracts audiences around the world, but also serve as a transmitter of cultural values. We can imagine America as a kind of cultural satellite: every piece of information picked up by the American satellite spreads further around the world. Information picked, let's say, by the Bulgarian cultural satellite spreads nowhere. Fortunately or unfortunately, justly or not, that is the world we live in.

Translated literature will have a certain place in American publishing if the salespeople can get something out of it. In spite of that, translated authors appear in American publishing houses, in American university presses, and the bookstores. A writer from Portugal, for instance, rushes himself to be translated and published in the Anglo-American market. Why? Because being translated into English brings him a chance to end up in Tokyo bookstores, translated into Japanese.

JC: When Stephen King won the National Book Award he used the opportunity to admonish critics for not reading more John Grisham. Have you read his comments? Were you horrified?

DU: Writers appreciated for what they can do best (in King's case: plot, suspense, productivity, and popularity) often want more, and that is to be appreciated as a "great writer." When writers have already written what they could, they tend to establish a supportive "ideology" around their work. That happened to Mr. King. He wants to establish his "system of literary values," which will last longer than the short fame of a prize. With the National Book Award awarded to Stephen King, the Literary Wall fell, which in American literary lands was never terribly high and steady anyway. In other words, the borders between "high" and "low" literature symbolically fell as well, and American literature became one, big united territory, the Republic of Letters. That also means that fiction symbolically turned back to its roots. Let us remember that the genre of the novel at the beginning had only one function: to be cheap, mass entertainment. Some other genres, like poetry, had been valued much more highly. However, fiction—which meant to be an amusement—managed to have its glorious history, its peaks, especially in the epoch of modernism.

Symbolic "unification"—brought by the National Book Award awarded to Stephen King—can produce new dynamics in American literary life, a new division, a new wave of elitism, a tendency of "demarketization," a trend of anticonsumerism, a trend of "cultural

decontamination,” and who knows what else.

Let me give you a different and European example: when the Berlin wall finally fell, many East Germans, those who desperately wished all their life that the Wall was gone, suddenly felt that something important was taken from them. Paradoxically, they started to feel “ostalgia,” nostalgia for “Ost,” for “East,” for familiar everyday surroundings, for their ugly “Made in East Germany” products; or even a nostalgia for the communist stigma which they bore for such a long time.

JC: The two creatures you quote the most in *Thank You For Not Reading* are Eeyore and Joseph Brodsky. What is your connection to these two?

DU: A mixture of skepticism and melancholy.

JC: There have been many people, from first-time writers to the Believer crowd, complaining about getting bad reviews. But you seem to imply in your book that publishing needs harsher critics. In your opinion, is America lacking a rigorous critical culture?

DU: No, it isn't. Statistically, America has as much critical culture as other countries have. That culture exists, but it is marginal and marginalized. Do I think that publishing needs harsher critics? Yes, I do. I miss literary criticism which will show more competence, more enthusiasm, and less apathy. I miss serious evaluation, an intellectual struggle, a dialogue, a polemic. In short, I miss a cultural context. You can't have culture without cultural context. Without strong intellectual context you end up on the bare market, dealing with the bare products.

Selected Works by Dubravka Ugresic in Translation:

The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays. Pennsylvania State UP, \$23.95.

Fording the Stream of Consciousness. Northwestern UP, \$18.00.

Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream. Out of Print.

In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories. Out of Print.

[*Lend Me Your Character.*](#) Dalkey Archive Press, \$12.95.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender. New Directions, \$14.95.

[*Thank You for Not Reading.*](#) Dalkey Archive Press, \$13.95.

Selected Untranslated Works:

Poza za prozu [A Pose for Prose]. Samizdat B92 and Konzor, €6.00.

Nova ruska proza [New Russian Prose]. Out of Print.

Current issue: CONTEXT # 22