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An Interview with Dubravka Ugrešić
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Conducted by *World Literature Today*

Dubravka Ugrešić is the 2016 winner of “America’s Nobel,” the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Born and raised in the former Yugoslavia, Ms. Ugrešić was a prominent critic of the Yugoslav Wars and the nationalist, anti-Serbian political sentiments that were popular in her homeland of Croatia. Her politically-charged writings eventually led to her exile in the Netherlands in 1993, where she has continued to live and write to this day. Her fiction and essay works frequently focus on themes of war and refugee, analyzing both the trauma and freedom experienced by those displaced. Her representative text for the Neustadt Prize, ‘The Museum of Unconditional Surrender,’ is one such work that reflects upon the shattered life of an exile. She is based in Amsterdam.

This interview was conducted by [World Literature Today](#).

Q: Thank you so much for speaking with us, and congratulations on your winning the 2016 Neustadt International prize for Literature. How did it feel when you got the news?

DU: Thank you. To be honest, the experience of being a finalist for a big literary prize is pretty complicated. Writers are not proud to admit their vulnerability in such situations, often ashamed of the childishness of hidden hopes. That’s why I disconnected myself from both phone and internet. I wanted to avoid the “bad news” when told that I did not win. As such, when I heard the jury’s decision, I got very happily confused.

Can you speak about your background, namely wartime in the former Yugoslavia? From your current perspective, how you do view the way that you were treated when you took a public antiwar stance and how does that experience apply to today's world?

That time changed me a lot. It was a unique experience that shattered my old political and moral beliefs, views and references, and my current perspective those events remains the same as it was then.

Some of my former contemporaries remain dedicated fascists, and others are just a little bit fascist as it suits them. It turns out that nationalism benefits some people very well, which I think is an insight into some of the political rhetoric we're seeing on the rise again now.

Given this, I would not alter a word in my book of essays "The Culture of Lies" – the book I published twenty years ago about the dismantling of Yugoslavia, nationalism, and the war. Today's reality just proves that I was right back then. Very little has changed.

What is the greatest challenge you have faced in writing narratives about that time?

My greatest challenge as a writer has been to find the proper words to reach not only those who share similar experiences, but to have those who do not also come to identify with my work.

My concerns are often "aesthetic" it seems: how to write about such dark times while avoiding the traps of journalistic pamphleteerism – of false moralism and false emotions – as well as simplifications. I want my readers to understand what I am talking about in a real way, with all the complexities of the issue good and bad.

The stories you tell about refugees is one that is currently timely. What reflections do you have about people being uprooted and living in exile?

The story of refugees is a basic story of the human condition. It's the oldest tale of mankind that constantly repeats itself throughout history, the tale that has been told and retold zillions of times. In a world structured by Christianity, the very first story is that of Adam and Eve – man's first exiles.

Mankind has always been on the move, traversing far and wide in a search of a more secure shelter, a better life. *They say that being uprooted is an exceptional condition, but I dare to claim the opposite.* From an historical point of view, being "rooted" is, in fact, the exceptional condition. The sad

thing is that many Europeans today, stricken by the “refugee crises,” are not in a position to accept that fact. And so the stories repeat themselves again.

For readers who are exposed to your work for the first time, what do you hope they will take away from your work?

Remembrance. I hope to be remembered by readers because I wrote something powerful but also pleasurable, and it connected with the reader.

In fact, this is the secret ambition of every writer. The writers I remember are my “family.” They go where I go and are always with me. To be remembered, to be a part of a reader’s personal “spiritual” baggage, to be part of her/his literary family – this is the biggest achievement of a writer.

What books are you reading, or have you read recently, that are making a connection with you?

I’ve recently read Japanese writer Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, who I discovered though something I am working on myself at the moment. His works explore cultural identity and traditional vs. changing modern culture in Japan, and it is a thrilling literary discovery for me. I am enjoying his third book at the moment.

I imagine that exploring cultural identity is of strong interest to you, especially given what that means to an exile or refugee in a new land.

Oh yes, and the idea can be explored in many ways. For instance, I am looking forward to visiting Oklahoma (to serve as the guest of honor at the 2016 Neustadt Festival.)

“Oklahoma” stands in my imagination as a piece of “Americana,” this huge American cultural narrative constructed by media, literature, films, and TV. It will be interesting, as it always is, to compare reality with this pre-formed “cultural text.”

Speaking of the Neustadt Prize, you are the first European female to win the award. Does the fact that you are a woman winning the prize, as well as a non-native English speaker winning a U.S.-based prize, hold special significance?

I think that the Neustadt Prize has an incredible record: 23 recipients over 45 years covering pretty much the whole world. The nomination process is very good, where writers nominate fellow writers. It results in winners who are consistently among the most impactful and respected writers of their era.

This year has been particularly noteworthy because the majority of finalists were women writers from different parts of the world (Croatia/Netherlands, Canada, China, Mexico, Scotland/Sierra Leone, the UK, and USA). I'd like to note that there is a nice addendum to add to this: women writers on the jury nominated other women writers, which is not often the case. I am glad to see this and believe it is worth celebrating.

So do we. Thank you so much for speaking with us today.

It was a pleasure.

This interview was conducted by [World Literature Today](#), which is associated with the [Neustadt Prize for Literature](#).