

MUSIC & LITERATURE



WHO IS THE ENEMY?: A CONVERSATION WITH DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

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by [Cynthia Haven](#)

Bergen is the wettest city in Europe—it rains almost every day of the year. But for the four days of the first-ever Bergen International Literary Festival, in February 2019, the weather gave way to a gentle drizzle, in deference to Norway’s evident love of literature. The fête, which began on Valentine’s Day, was Bergen’s love letter to the world, held in a crowded, centuries-old multi-story brick building called the “Literature House,” located in the medieval part of the city.

Nearly five thousand festival visitors celebrated books—at the plethora of talks and discussions, or at the bookstore, or chatting over the scones and coffee between sessions, or sipping wine in the café, or lingering outdoors to revel in Bergen’s mild coastal temperatures and morning fog.

Ninety guests from twenty nations led events that were evenly split between fiction and non-fiction. One of the lions among them was the Amsterdam-based Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, who had an onstage conversation with Music & Literature co-editor Daniel Medin, as well as appearing in two other events.

She is the author of Fox and American Fictionary (both 2018 releases in English), and also The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, Thank You For Not Reading, Karaoke Culture, Europe in Sepia, and The Ministry of Pain, among others. Born in Yugoslavia, she witnessed its dissolution and descent into war

and atrocities in the 1990s. Afterwards, she was a fierce critic of Croatia's nationalism and ethnic cleansing, which led to her exile. She settled in Amsterdam in 1996. However, moving westward also made her an increasingly international figure; in 2016, she received the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, which many consider a precursor to the Nobel.

This interview was initiated in person during Bergen International Literary Festival, then continued over email. It was transcribed by Michelle Lynch, and has been lightly edited for concision and clarity. Dubravka Ugrešić was previously featured in a 100-page portfolio in Music & Literature no. 6.

—Cynthia Haven

WHO IS THE ENEMY?

Cynthia Haven: Violence has been a theme of this conference: Juan Gabriel Vásquez on the Colombian drug wars, three sessions for the Nigerian journalist and author Helon Habila, who spoke about the kidnapped Boko Haram girls and the ongoing terrorism in Nigeria—even the French writer and critic Raphaëlle Leyris from *Le Monde* noted that several books a month are still coming out on the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris. And today's session on literature and evil. You, too, have written about unspeakable violence going on in the middle of Europe, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Several have commented in Bergen on how the cataclysms of mid-century Europe seem to be revisiting us today, and they wish they could shake that feeling.

Dubravka Ugrešić: The world certainly didn't become better with the fall of the Wall, with the fall of Yugoslavia, with the independence of former Yugoslav republics, and with the switch of former communist regimes into democratic ones. What people in Eastern and Central Europe got instead of democracy are mafia structured "constellations"—economic, political, ideological. *Democratura*: this is the term coined by one of Yugoslav's public thinkers. The expression plays with the words *dictatorship*, *democracy*, and *caricature*. Instead of the democracy most people in former communist countries dreamt of, a grotesque, state-like mixture made of revisionist elements suddenly emerged. The most dangerous of such elements was neo-fascism.

You are still hated by many in your homeland, the former Yugoslavia.

Not so! I have devoted readers in the Yugo-zone, otherwise I wouldn't get published in Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia.

However, there is that "hate-story." It started long ago, when the long-latent nationalism on all ethnic sides of Yugoslavia started to pop out, when Yugoslavia was falling apart, when the war finally started. I raised my voice against the collective self-destructive madness. My first essay, "Clean Croatian Air," caused a media storm in Croatia shortly after its publication in London's *Independent* and Hamburg's *Die Zeit*. Inspired and enforced by the Croatian media, the Croatian collective anger turned in my direction. That's how I became a favorite target of Croatian nationalists—Serbian nationalists, too. We have to mention the proportions here. Most of the four million Croatian citizens, according to official figures, are nationalists. If it weren't so, the political, economic, and cultural life in Croatia would be much healthier. Stubborn nationalistic politicians have already ruled for a quarter of a century, and the majority of people

of Croatia, equally stubborn, vote for them again and again. Nationalism became as natural as the air that Croats breathe—hence the title of my essay. Nationalism, with the help of the powerful Croatian Catholic church, plagued every inch of Croatian life: the politics, education system, laws, media, everyday life, “intellectual life.” Nationalism is the Croatian oxygen. I wrote about it in the romantic belief that it was important to raise my voice and tell the truth. The same toxic atmosphere rules in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is the biggest victim of Yugoslav disaster.

And so you were the chosen scapegoat for that society for a while.

I didn't feel like a scapegoat. There are many anonymous civilians who were scapegoats and nobody will ever hear about them or have a chance to remember them: many people were killed, chased out, mobbed, robbed, humiliated, fired. Many people left, many emigrated. All because of local neo-fascist strategies. The biggest victims in Croatia were ordinary people of Serbian ethnicity. In Bosnia, the biggest victims were Muslims. And so on and so forth. Those who were responsible for these “silent persecutions” were never brought to the justice. And they never will be. Because justice in the Yugo-zone obediently serves the people in power.

I survived because I managed to distance myself from “my case.” I managed to observe it as an anthropological experiment. I left the country and, through my essays and novels, I made the post-communist reality visible for those who are interested to read about it.

Interesting. Could you elaborate on how you “distanced” yourself? How were you an “anthropological case”?

I was more preoccupied with the human ability to inflict pain on others than I was with my own pain. Otherwise, I would never have been able to believe that human beings are capable of doing the things they usually do when they are placed in specific collective constellations that liberate them of any responsibility or feeling of guilt. I don't feel I am a victim. It's easy to see yourself as a victim, and to feel like a victim. Even the most brutal criminals and perpetrators do not feel guilty. Instead, they feel they are victims.

I liked what you said yesterday in your talk with Daniel Medin, and I wrote it down: “It's always the same story—and it's a good story for authors, sociologists, psychiatrists. The majority of people act the same. Somebody wants to hang or burn you—99 percent are rushing forward with the match. Some people don't want to look, but only one person says, ‘Come on, let's not do that.’ For me, I could not rush with the match.” That, of course, makes you the next victim—or, as you said, “a witch, or a bitch.”

That's proved itself so many times throughout the history of humankind. That's why humankind invented the basic story. That story serves as an alibi, anticipating many such cases that will endlessly repeat themselves in the future—as in the story of Jesus Christ. First we will kill him and then we say “sorry.” We may forget to say sorry.

And this is what you write in *Fox*, your latest novel:

Naked human fear was perhaps [the] greatest revelation, it showed us all as having a low tolerance, we're like mice that run even from a wind-up cat. And everything else was about the law of gravity. Those who joined the stampede were spared, those who flailed to

keep from falling were trounced. Heroes were always trounced in the end. The mob dictated the criteria and standards, at the first available opportunity it recast its fear as courage, its transgressions as heroism, and so on.

Yes, the rule of the mob.

Who is the enemy then?

I wouldn't try to guess. But Jean-Paul Sartre dared to say that hell is the other. Other human beings, I suppose.

It's a scary thought. If you don't howl with the wolves, the wolves will howl for you.

It *is* scary, but also a liberating thought that people still have options. If you click on the Amsterdam Resistance Museum website, you will be welcomed by a simple interactive question. It presents the time of Nazi occupation in the Netherlands and gives the website visitor three options: to adapt, to collaborate, or to resist. Always these three basic options. In real life, the majority of people click on the button "adapt." The option to "resist" is the most unpopular choice.

MIGRATIONS

Greece has had migration since the time of Hesiod, and the Bible of course tells about several millennia of one particular tribe's wanderings. America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and many other nations have a long history of immigration and assimilation. Your theme is exile and migration, so tell me: Why do we treat migration as an exception? Given our history, why is "rootedness" seen as the norm? You have written that we usually view the state of being rooted as "normal." And migration and exile is—

Abnormal. Why is being rooted seen as a norm? Because this idea comes from the Bible. From a practical point of view—and God knew this—it is easier to control, to influence, to exploit, to manipulate, to organize people who are rooted than those who are unrooted—even if there are only two of them! That's why the Exile is the first and the biggest punishment of humankind. That punishment is described in the story about Adam and Eve and the prohibited, symbolic fruit stolen from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve wanted to try the forbidden apple, she dared to test God's power. It was not Adam's idea or intention. That story, that exile, is the *meme* of humankind. And that's why we constantly repeat the story. Unrooted, we also become "territorial," we search for our "little paradises," we build and buy homes, our "nests." If we abandon our "nests" and "paradises," we get punished. Don't we?

There is a theory that women became "unequal" from the moment people decided to settle, to give up the troubled nomadic life. Man continued to hunt, for example, in other words, to "travel," while women stayed "at home." By the way, maybe the story about Adam and Eve should be read as an emancipatory story. Good girls *stay* in paradise, but bad girls *go* everywhere.

There are people who do not want to belong—to their ethnicity, to their state, to their circles, to their groups. That should be, together with its consequences, a basic right. An insurgency always irritates the majority. I flatter myself that I irritate some people not only because of my deep anti-nationalism, but because I question some things that are not questioned, that are taken as granted, as a norm of normality.

My refusal to belong to the national literature; my struggle to promote a transnational and post-national platform in literature; my fight for higher standards in literature, writing, evaluating, and reading. Once again, I probably flatter myself heavily here: I simply don't take into account that the vast majority of people don't read. My impact is negligible.

Of course, to be nowhere makes you an obvious candidate for being a scapegoat, too, in a world that is continually asking, "Are you left-wing or right-wing, Democrat or Republican—"

I am a vegetarian! This is a joke, of course. But here is another one I want to tell you. Adam, coming home from work, chats with Eve. And then he asks her: "You didn't touch that tree in our garden, did you?" "No, God forbid! I didn't," she says. "Great! So, what do we have for lunch?" he asks. "Apple pie," answers Eve.

But, let's not make a joke of the reality that is as old as human civilization, that has many names and faces, that causes many deaths and misfortunes, but also brings new lives and knowledge. Let's not joke about the reality we are a part of, which is the test of humankind and its values. That is the reality of migrations. At this moment, there are around sixty million migrants in the world, they say. Sixty million people who didn't abandon their countries, but whose countries abandoned them; who didn't abandon their homes, but whose homes abandoned them. There are so many people who are dying on the road with the conviction that they fought for a better future for their children. How many of them died on that road to that better future? The figures might allow us to talk about the mass suicide, or more precisely mass murder. Who is ready to assume the responsibility for it?

THE FOX

You write about the fox as the totem for the writer—adhering to the convention of the writer as dangerous, edgy, shape-shifting. But aren't most writers' lives rather boring? I think of what Philip Roth said: "Literature takes a habit of mind that has disappeared. It requires silence, some form of isolation, and sustained concentration in the presence of an enigmatic thing." It's not exactly gripping stuff—which is why it's so hard to make a good movie about writers or the life of the mind.

What could be duller than Proust's life? Most of us live lives that are rooted in our heads, and it's isolated and isolating—what can be more boring than that?

Yes, but there is something else, too. I've suggested that Scheherazade is the fox, Scheherazade is the writer who didn't go to creative writing school. It's too expensive, and she would have had to pay twenty thousand euros for two years. But she passed at the school of a thousand-and-one nights, okay? She gave as a fee, as a "scholarship," her own head. So we can't spit and be cynical about that. It's a serious thing, to tell a story under such circumstances.

I've chosen the fox as a symbolic representation of a writer. The fox is rich with meaning. In the Western cultural tradition, the fox is mainly a male creature. In Eastern cultures, the fox is mostly a female creature. In Slavic folk culture, the fox is also predominantly female. The fox is not a superior creature: she is a loser and a loner, wild and vulnerable. The fox is one of the most popular hunting targets: her skin, her fur, has a commercial value, a detail which makes the fox a deeply tragic figure. The fox is betrayed more often than it betrays. Representations of the fox differ from culture to culture. I was raised

on the fox's representation in Aesop's fables and Western European medieval novels. In Chinese, Korean, and Japanese mythology, the fox is a semi-divine creature, a god's messenger, a demonic shape-shifter that passes the borders between realms—human, animal, demonic. The fox is also seen as a cheap entertainer, a liar, a cheater, a little thief with a risky appetite for the “metaphysical bite,” a thief with a constant desire to grab a “heavenly chicken.”

Let's go back, for a minute, to Scheherazade. I can't disagree with your comments. And yet, “storytelling” has become this all-purpose cliché for the very complicated art of writing.

I am irritated by these global buzz words that appear and disappear. However, they are in a way coordinates, or traffic signs, that regulate “intellectual traffic.” They do not mean much. They are just little helpers, and, yes, a sort of intellectual affectation. Most often such little structures are put into wide circulation by the global marketplace. The majority of participants in literary zones do not know anything about literary theory—or literary narration, for that matter. Nor are they obliged to know. That's why such little inventions, like storytelling, help an ordinary participant to feel more comfortable in literature.

The equalization of everything resulted in the mediocrity of everything. One thing that Joseph Brodsky and Czesław Miłosz spoke about was the importance of hierarchy. If you were exposed to them at all, you inherited that.

Whenever people say, “It's art if I say it's art,” there's no recognition that John Milton is on a different scale than what you produced in your creative writing class. Brodsky exhorted us to drop on our knees before our predecessors who established these standards of your language. The recognition of standards, in literature, standards in painting, standards in ways of thinking and feeling.

This process is not a Devil's conspiracy but the logical consequence of mass culture, popular culture, and digital culture. Digital culture opened doors to everybody. Thanks to digital culture, today literally everybody can be a writer, a philosopher, a painter, a musician... At the same time, we recognize that not everybody can be an opera singer, a classical ballet dancer—just as not everybody can be a surgeon. That means that literature became a lazy *activity* which doesn't require knowledge and effort, so consequently anybody is able to perform it. All in all, it is impossible to have a global literary market and high literary standards. That lucky liaison is rare and it happens maybe once in a hundred years. Every marketplace lives on mediocrity. The field of evaluation has been abandoned by defenders of a good taste, of arbiters.

MEN

Something you said that I think is very true: “That through women, men find their way to other men.”

Let us be fair, men are not the only ones who, consciously or unconsciously, manipulate. However, it is fair to say that there are some examples of women in history who attracted men because they were known as mistresses of other men. Love is often a struggle for territory and power, a social game. Literary life is rich in such examples. One such example is Lily Brik, wife of Russian futurist Osip Brik and mistress of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Both of her men died, and she carried on, living with another two men who were honored by inheriting “the territory” previously owned by two famous men. Such *liaisons dangereuses* are not foreign to human nature, but Brik's story happened in the time of sexual liberation—remember Alexandra Kollontai! Also later, during the Communist era, sexual privacy was the only territory of freedom that was left.

The comment we're discussing is another remark from the character of the Widow in *Fox*, who was discussing Alma Mahler. You wrote—or rather, the Widow said—“her main talent was a deep and abiding knowledge of the economy of love.” What else might she had said that you didn't have time to write down?

Everything's about the economy of love. When I see men—how they are natural, relaxed, and comfortable in the company of other men—I realize that it will take much longer for both genders to become emancipated from God's given roles. Many men see the world like military life—that is the strongest human *meme*, where women stay at home and wait for men to come back from glorious battles with other men. Or, to use an analogy that is a bit more current, many men see the world like a football game, where they play with each other in order to play against each other. Why do men never wonder why women are so obviously excluded from so many zones of public life? Why doesn't one of them ever protest that he will not participate in the conference, discussion, forum, or event unless the number of participants is equally divided: half women and half men? Why? Because they don't see anything unusual in the landscape they are so used to.

That has happened, in fact, happened on occasion. Admittedly not often.

Many men see women as ideal cheerleaders and they are glad to get support of women-cheerleaders in literature, art, sports, politics, and so on and so forth. Alma Mahler got a ticket to history because she was a perfect cheerleader—not to one, but to couple of successful, talented, great men. Maybe she found a way to compensate, maybe she knew she was not talented enough and decided that it was better to go for symbiosis rather than for an individual and independent life. Besides, her men didn't express their dissatisfaction with this arrangement.

In *Fox*, I include stories about women-footnotes (and about men-footnotes too), and you are citing the whole chapter about the invented widow of an invented famous writer. I was inspired by famous Russian widows, not directly, of course. Let me only mention Isaac Babel's widow, Antonina Pirozhkova. That beautiful and intelligent woman was known as a constructor of the Moscow Metro and also Babel's wife. Babel and Pirozhkova began to live together in 1934. They had a daughter in 1937. Babel was executed in 1940. Pirozhkova lived a long life—she lived to be 101—and a good part of it she devoted to administering Babel's literary estate. She managed to be recognized as Babel's widow, although they were never officially married. Was her life a victory or a punishment? Was it a mission? Life taken as a sacrifice? One can hardly find the opposite story in literary history, where a man facilitates a woman's talent. The stories about women-editors, agents, librarians, copy writers, curators, financial and moral supporters, devotees, museums curators, archivists, typists, organizers, publicity managers, secretaries are more than common. The story about Margarita serving her Master is the biggest possible male (but also female) fantasy, which was exploited in a masterpiece, written by a great man, Mikhail Bulgakov. The history of literature consists of men's busts and women's bones.

REAL ESTATE

Our desires are mutable, and formed in competition. So with nations. Would Alsace Lorraine be so valued if it were not wanted by both France and Germany? I remember a tattered blanket that our three family cats fought for, not because it was softer or cozier than the others, but simply because the other cats wanted it.

That reminded me of what you wrote: “Every war is fought over real estate. This last war, too, was waged—or so it seemed when all was said and done—for real estate. Somebody lost property, somebody else procured it, some moved in, others moved out, some smashed others’ statues, some torched others’ homes, some, uprooting others, grabbed control of factories, banks, media, political positions, mines, shipyards, ambassadorial posts, railway lines, highways . . . Blood was shed for real estate. The warmongers used the word ‘homeland’ for real estate so people would have fewer misgivings. Why say he fell for real estate when it sounds so much more convincing to say he fell for the homeland? For buying and selling real estate one gets a percentage, for defending the homeland—medals.”

I simply replaced the words “money” and “profit” with a term everybody understands, “real estate.” Besides, the war in Yugoslavia, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, was literally a war for property. Tens of thousands of people were chased from their houses, deprived of their homes and property. Tens of thousands of houses owned by Serbs were set on fire. That was the policy of “ethnic cleansing.” Serbs had lived in Croatia for ages. Twelve percent of Croatian population was Serbian before the war. They were successfully erased. Today, less than 3.5 percent of Croatian citizens are ethnic Serbs. About 250,000 Croatian Serbs were expelled from Croatia in a “glorious” action of ethnic cleansing named “The Storm.” Some other minorities got “cleansed,” too. Albanians living in Zagreb, for instance. Albanians were owners of little profitable businesses, and Croats used the situation of war to take their businesses, houses, TV sets, jewelry, whatever. Looting was the sweetest part of war. And it doesn’t stop. One could recently read in *The Guardian*, or in Amnesty International reports, about Croatian police and their treatment of refugees, Syrian and others, who gather at the Bosnian–Croatian border trying to get in to Croatia on their way to Austria, Germany, or Scandinavian countries. The most popular welcoming gesture is stealing their cell phones.

ASHES

I like what your narrator said about the widow’s husband, the famous writer: “I became acquainted with a writer whom I saw again after many years. He’d been anxious his whole life about how to insure his own survival, because, by taking care of himself he was taking care of his books, the ones already written and the ones he’d yet to write.”

Do you feel that way about yourself? I often do. I measure my time by effort: “If I can just eke out a few more years, I can finish...” I wondered if you felt that as well. And then there’s that comment from Jozef Czapski’s lectures on Proust in a Soviet prison camp: “Goethe said that in the life of a creative man, biography can and must be considered only up to the thirty-fifth year, after that it’s no longer his life story, but his struggle with the substance of his work that must become central and, more and more, increasingly absorbing.” I don’t know that Goethe said it, but certainly Czapski did.

I think that such thoughts and ideas about creativity and an author’s positioning in the creative world have to do with practices and practicalities of “our culture” and “our trade.” To answer this question, we have to know literary history. Besides, whose literary history are we talking about? Western Europe’s? Asia’s? Africa’s?

And finally, we got back to gender, and I apologize of speaking of the obvious. Male writers are already born with the cultural meme that literature is their territory. They inherit the history of all the values that accumulated over centuries: building a canon, being a part of a canon, being a representative of national

literature. Women usually serve as muses; that is the highest position they used to be able to reach in literary hierarchy. Women writers inherit a memory of cultural exclusion. Women do not have the same survival chip in their brains, they do not have any sense of the “ashes” they are going to leave. They are deprived of any sense of historical mission. They give birth to children. What other mission is a woman supposed to fulfill?

It might seem to you that I am talking about things that need an urgent update. True, women are slowly but surely coming to the fore in literature. I am not saying that they are bringing radically different views, language, texts or relationships when it comes to the product known on the global market as a “book.” I am just saying that women want historical justice. However, their victory might be bitter, because men may abandon the territory of literature when there is nothing left to inherit. I have in mind the future of literature, the future of writing and the future of reading. Once I joked that literature in the future will be written exclusively by “madmen”—women included! The literature of future might finally come to its “home.” That may happen in the hypothetical situation when the book market de-marketizes itself, de-commercializes itself, when there is nothing to sell and buy, when all the participants, producers of goods, peddlers, merchandisers, announcers, buyers, when all this loud, vital, and fascinating crew abandons the marketplace.

Maybe from that abandoned space, from that silence, some new writers will appear followed by some new readers, and maybe from their tight relationship some new literature, some new type of communication will appear. Who knows what might happen after all the battles are over?

Dubravka Ugrešić is the author of seven works of fiction, most recently *Fox*, and many collections of essays, including *Karaoke Culture*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and *The Age of Skin*, forthcoming from Open Letter in September 2019.

Cynthia Haven is a 2018/19 National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar and the author of *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*. She writes regularly for *The Times Literary Supplement*, and has also contributed to *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, among many others.

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