

The Hindu Business Line

Why Dubrava Ugresic is a writer's writer's writer

Palash Krishna Mehrotra

The Croatian author of *Thank You For Not Reading*, rips into the contemporary literary scene in essays that are as scathing as they are side-splitting

Every reader has a go-to writer, an author she can read and re-read, till death does them apart. For me, that writer is Dubravka Ugresic. She occupies a large slice of my literary soul.

Jhumpa Lahiri once described a writer's writer as someone who writes every book like their first book: "Everybody writes their first book with a certain innocence, a purity of vision. A writer's writer writes every book that way." If that is the case, then Ugresic is the writer's writer's writer. John Ashbery once called Elizabeth Bishop that.

The purity of Ugresic's X-ray vision cannot be doubted, though 'innocence' doesn't quite apply to her. The American writer Curtis White said about her work: The writing is shot through with "rare cunning", underlying all of which is a genuinely "humbling and inspiring honesty". It exudes an ironic ferocity. Ugresic knows the score. No one can fool her. The opposite of innocence.

Ugresic, I imagine, would be horrified by the phrase 'A writer's writer's writer'. It scares the reader away. She is the kind of writer who wants to draw the reader close.

When asked in an interview (*World Literature Today*) what impact she'd like to leave on a first-time reader of her work, she said: "Remembrance. 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." It's rare to find one's heroes actually saying what one idealises them as saying. Ugresic is family.

Ugresic, now 70, is a cult hero, with a voluminous body of work to her name: Over 20 titles in Croatian, which include novels, collections of essays and children's books. Fifteen of these are available in English translation, including her latest essay collection, *American Fictionary*. Her books have been translated into more than 20 languages.

In 2016, Ugresic was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (dubbed the American Nobel), the first non-European woman writer to win it in the four decades of its existence. She was also a finalist for the Man Booker Prize in 2009. In the aftermath of the 1991 war in Yugoslavia, Ugresic was a vocal critic of both Croatian and Serbian nationalism; she was forced to flee and settled in exile in Amsterdam.

I was first drawn to Ugresic because of her scathing essays, which are also hugely entertaining. She uses a light hammer to nail and hang heavy pictures. She writes about exile but also about Americana. In *Karaoke Culture*, she takes in everything from fan fiction to YouTube stars, and how the internet is changing our relationship with art.

In *Thank You For Not Reading* (brilliantly translated by Celia Hawkesworth, and doggedly kept in print by Dalkey Archive), Ugresic sends up modern-day book culture and the cogs that make it. It bears the stamp of her elegant grumpiness and mischievous sagacity. The essays are generously prefaced with quotes from *Winnie the Pooh*; Ugresic calls Eeyore “the best-known grumbler in literary history”.

We live in a time when authors behave like MBAs and editors lack the aesthetic wherewithal and courage to make brave calls about quality literature: “The world of the literary market is ruled by the producers of books, but producing books does not quite mean producing literature.”

In a parodic essay called *Book Proposal* she jokes about authors who spend more time writing proposals than the book itself. She writes imaginary proposals. “I took the trouble to write a book proposal for *Remembrance of Things Past*. It was turned down. Boring, too long, change the title.”

She sends up book fairs that have nothing to do with books and editors trying to look like writers by having their photographs taken against a background of bookshelves. These days, in jacket photographs, male writers themselves “increasingly display intelligently formed muscles”; “women writers submit to facelifts”.

The best strategy for young authors to get published is to become famous in some other capacity: Footballer, actor, chef. In another essay, *Low Income Writer*, she has a word of caution: “A writer who thinks about his literary environment, not just about the writing itself, had best keep quiet. Hold his tongue. Otherwise he cuts away the branch he is sitting on.”

A “real writer” is never “sure that he or she is a writer”, “so the publishing industry profits from the low self-confidence of its producers”. “A real writer feels guilty and thinks that

what he's doing is unimportant, or useless or privileged (although he's not paid for it), while other serious people work. Such writers are always in awe of physicists, carpenters and surgeons, and can always be crushed with the greatest of ease, like a worm or a fly. As soon as he is appealed to in the name of humanism, a writer with low self-esteem immediately forgoes his fee."

In *The Aura of Glamour*, she wonders how in the contemporary media market, "literature too has acquired an aura of glamour. What is so attractive about the literary profession today that it makes so many people mill around the marketplace awaiting their starry moment?"

"Tubercular neurotics, humble bunglers, drunks, wastrels, bohemians, thin men and women in black wool sweaters leaning against a well-stocked home bookshelf, short-sighted smokers of pipes and cigars — they are all a thing of the distant past."

She answers this question via Milan Kundera, who wrote that one day, when everyone writes, nobody will listen. That day has arrived. In other words, sums up Ugresic: "Literacy can have an aura of glamour only where literacy does not exist."

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