

Peter Mitchell reviews *Fox* by Dubravka Ugrešić

Translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursac and David Williams (Open Letter Press, 2018)



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Peter Mitchell is from Newcastle, but was most recently employed as a historical researcher for Tottenham Hotspur FC.

All the descriptions of Dubravka Ugrešić's *Fox*, either from the publisher Open Letter or elsewhere, suggest it's a smorgasbord of literary trivia, anecdote, and musings about The Magic Of Stories. The font on the cover—which features a big, blocky picture of a fox—suggests a cuddly wryness, while the blurb on the back emphasizes wit, originality, and “the timeless story of a woman trying to escape her hometown and find love to magical effect.” You can't blame publishers for wanting to sell books using the language available, nor can you fault reviewers for turning out the expected copy. If you really want translated fiction to reach a wide audience you're probably going to have to make it sound like a delightful and fundamentally unchallenging adventure, with a foreign culture prettily packaged for easy consumption, traumatic histories addressed through tasteful and absolving memorialisation, and—if there's even a whiff of metafiction—some tummy-tickling stuff about how books cast spells and readers are a special kind of being.

Those who pick up *Fox* expecting this sort of thing might feel cheated. This difficult, bristling, savagely angry and haunted book lets no one off the hook. Ugrešić uses the fox—trickster, shapeshifter, thief—as a figure for the writer, but she does so in ways that are not amenable to cuddliness. This fox is a bastard: its art is survival by all underhand means, and it's distinguished by needling savagery and hunger, relentless kleptomania and maddening evasiveness. It has no sense of solidarity with other creatures and it lives alone. Those who come near it tend to end up discarded or dead. It brings bad luck. If the binding motif of the book is that the writer's proper totem is a fox, it's an astonishingly bleak parsing of the job, suggesting that to Joyce's tools of silence, cunning, and exile we might add such qualities as “being a dick” and “killing everything you touch.”

Barely fiction, *Fox* isn't quite essay either. Most of its six parts are structured around the adventures (if you can call them that) of a narrator—who, as a Croatian writer in late middle age exiled in Amsterdam since the war, closely resembles Ugrešić herself—while she treads the middle-ranking European writers' circuit, grouching over her back pain on economy flights, being miserable in cheap hotels, and getting grossed out by the mendicancy of going from symposium to conference to shadily funded cultural beano. Interspersed among episodes from this itinerant life is a series of literary-historical detective stories that push with increasing force against the boundaries of the real or possible. There's also an interlude in the country that almost turns into a romance, as well as attempts to connect with other humans, all of whom emerge as foxes-in-training, foxes-in-recovery, or foxes in the full flow of their slippery fox-ness. To become a fox, it becomes clear early on, is to accept the deformations of character which enable people—not just writers, but all exiles, comen, survivors, border-crossers, people in transition, and involuntary hybrids—to survive the multiple betrayals of language, politics, and circumstance.

That Ugrešić makes of all this a novel that's both ferociously entertaining and formally spectacular is something like a miracle. *Fox* is cunning in the sense that a finely made piece of jewellery or a precision piece of engineering is: densely patterned and recursive, turning intricately back on itself, and resolving order out of apparent chaos. Narrated in short fragments that often number more than one per page, and veering wildly in tone within the space of a sentence, it is also deliberately, maddeningly evasive. Whatever Ugrešić seems about to say, she never quite does; each new break in the text can feel like the wilful dodging of a conclusion or cadence that was just hovering into view. That translators Ellen Elias Bursac and David Williams manage to reproduce the complex and momentarily shifting irony of Ugrešić's dizzyingly mobile writing is a serious achievement.

The first tale, an oblique investigation into the doomed Russian writer Boris Pil'nyak's “A Story About How Stories Come to be Written,” keeps insisting that it is, itself, a story about how stories come to be written. But it gets off track as Ugrešić dilates on her parents, her half-century-old memories of being a student, her life, and Russian literature in general. Yet each time she swerves back with some version of the same phrase: “This, however, is not a story about my mother and father, but a story about how stories come to be written.” It's an established Shandyesque trick that in another writer might be merely cutesy. Coming from Ugrešić, however, there's something savage about it, a vulpine evasion arising from the experience of trauma and the expectation of more of the same, a self-protective tic of the displaced and afraid.

Like Ugrešić, the narrator (is there even a difference?) was a Russianist in a previous life who spent part of the 1970s in Moscow researching a master's dissertation. The life she describes there is one of shortages, samizdat passed round like secret scripture, and a scholarly project abandoned to chase after the ghosts of writers annihilated in the purges and the war. Her interest in literary conundra, which begins with Pil'nyak, soon extends to Doivber or Boris Levin, a marginal member of the OBERIU groupuscule of Russian avant-gardists. Later, she investigates an incident involving Vladimir Nabokov's discovery of a new species of butterfly during a road trip across the United States.

Women who rarely receive fair treatment are always to be found around these men. There is the “plain” librarian who drove Nabokov and his wife across the United States and whose capture of the butterfly that will be named after her is, in Ugrešić's telling, a scene of complex eroticism and mutual humiliation; the woman Pil'nyak first mistreated and then used for her narrative spare parts in writing “A Story About How Stories Come to be Written”; and the various women mistreated by Doivber/Boris Levin before he was snuffed out, or wasn't, somewhere in the meat grinder of the Eastern Front. Most haunting of all, however, are the relicts. The Widow, the silkily glamorous last companion and legatee of a writer whose name is also Levin, appears as a strange and not quite likeable figure dedicated to safeguarding the legacy of a man whom she knew to be as ridiculous, gross, childish, and pathetic as all the great male writers here. Later there's a Russian woman who thinks she might be the daughter of Levin, the doomed OBERIU figure, and who writes a book suggesting that he changed his name to escape the NKVD and the front before sneaking out of Russia to start life anew. Every chapter of her book is headed with a quote from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* in untranslated Russian: “Come on Woland, let's have the manuscript!” It's a sly riff on the kind of Shandyesque clowning that Ugrešić herself indulges in, and with its excursions into alternative histories worthy of Borges or Kiš, the book becomes a vehicle for Ugrešić to have some wry metafictional fun at her own expense. “After her career through literary-prophetic material, she launches into laments over contemporary culture, which she doesn't understand well; these laments are followed by autobiographical details which are, I should say, the most successful in terms of literary merit.” It's exactly like *Fox* to sneak a bathetic auto-review of its own apparent directionlessness into what turns out to be one of the points in the novel where you really believe that something might be revealed, finally and definitively.

It's not, of course, and very little is. The most direct parts of *Fox*—if we can ever trust it enough to be anything like direct—concern other people, particularly those outside the literary and exilic fox-world. There's Ugrešić's relationship with her nearly-teenage niece, the daughter of a dead sister, which unfolds on the page as a remarkably poignant portrait of intimacy after trauma. With a mix of sheer animal need, irritation, fear, and longing, as well as a kind of terrified wonder, Ugrešić watches this child fiercely, listening to her every intonation, afraid of something never quite stated—perhaps the possibility that the child, too, is becoming a fox as she learns the arts of survival.

Elsewhere, Ugrešić arrives at a country house which has mysteriously fallen into her hands only to find it inhabited by a man her own age. Once a judge, he lost the job when the political situation deteriorated in the early 1990s and he failed to make the compromises required of everyone in public life. His wife and daughter left the country. He stayed. What happened then is unclear, but now he lives alone and below the radar, clearing mines from the surrounding woodland. He is one of the closest things to an avatar of honesty and commitment the novel offers—a reformed fox, if you will. A figure of decency, however ambiguously come by, his existence—monadic, outside of history or merely clearing up after it—poses a rebuke to the novel's more compromised figures: the protesting or unreformed or self-deluding foxes. (It's worth noting here that Ugrešić the writer, not her fictional avatar, also refused to stop speaking her mind when things turned nasty, an affair that receives some glancing references in *Fox* and that the reader should bear in mind when ploughing through its catalogue of writerly moral abjection. Not unlike Samuel Beckett—or Pil'nyak, who abased himself in public while acting courageously on behalf of his friends during the purges, may have supplied André Gide with material about the real conditions in the Soviet Union, and received an NKVD bullet to the back of the head for his trouble—Ugrešić's commitment to absurdity as a form of hard-eyed moral realism is built around a core of steely political decency.)

These relationships are drawn with a sparingness that, you come to expect, might well be drawing attention to itself, signalling with a look and a wink: *check out how sparing I am when I do the Big Feels*. The possibility that any or all of the book's sincerities might be red herrings—that there might be no bedrock of intent, just evasions all the way down—is one of the ways *Fox* most haunts its reader. Is there anything left to hold on to? In some sense, all these essays (or episodes, or fables, or practical jokes) can be read as attempts to engage with Ugrešić's one (waxing, provisional, frustrated) object of faith: language. A multilingual novel, *Fox* repeatedly returns to questions in translation, the bizarre intonations of non-native speech, the uncanny persistence of etymology through languages, and the curious instabilities of authority that come with the linguistic border-crossing of exile.

To take just one example, *Fox* contains a fair amount of Russian, including book titles, stray words, and even the odd sentence. In one particularly spectacular footnote, the editors commit to using Cyrillic scripts: “in Slavic languages, the word *jež*, *ѣк*, *ѣк*, *ježek*, *ježko*, *ѣкac*, means hedgehog.” And, worse, in a transliteration which often seems to be filtered through the Croatian alphabet, rather than through any half-decent system for rendering Cyrillic in a way which makes instinctual sense to an Anglophone reader. Although this makes for some fun estrangement games that the text's translatedness only deepens, there are some truly puzzling instances, as when Ugrešić back-translates one of Nabokov's sentences: “Nabokov said, somewhere, that two people in love behave like Siamese twins: one sneezes when the other sniffs tobacco (*V ljubvy nužno byt' kak siamskie bliźnecy, odin chihaet, kogda drugoj njubuet tabak*).” If you read Russian, this is decipherable but mildly engaging; if you can't, it might as well be in Cyrillic since it just reveals the obvious cognates “siamskie” and “tabak.”

Of course, this could be part of the novel's evasive gamesmanship, its efforts to always outfox readers. And there's certainly plenty of interest here for thinking about translation and untranslatability, and the politics of lexis and script that are particularly fraught in the Croatian context. But I think publishers (and Dalkey Archive Press's translations of Danilo Kiš come to mind here as another example) are sometimes too scared to afford other scripts the same courtesy we've extended to, say, ancient Greek for centuries. If the idea is that it would now look like undemocratic gatekeeping—*don't bother reading this unless you know your way around the language of Homer*—then fair enough. But I don't feel particularly well served by puzzling through the organised noise of a language I don't know rendered in my own script rather than the one it's fitted for.

The authorial voice in *Fox* never turns tail or hesitates when faced with unfamiliar script, preferring instead to read every sign that comes its way to exhaustion. But exhaustion is also where it ends, since the pursuit of signification is ultimately pathological. Exile partly explains it: as Ugrešić traverses Europe reading the small mythologies of each city's self-image and self-narration, she's never at home but always alert to trouble, and particularly attuned, like all exiles, to those with whom she shares a mother tongue. Language, like everything else, is by turns relentless, dangerous, difficult, and boring, and its overload can lead to either disintegration or paranoia. In the first case, it leaves Ugrešić curled around her phone in a darkened hotel room, falling asleep to images of the pure chaos of Eyjafjallajökul's eruption; in the latter, it produces her conviction, while viewing a glitchy website that jumbles meaningful text with random words, that she has stumbled upon some level of signification which simultaneously elevates and reduces everything to pure, bottomless text:

What if texts, imprinted on infinitesimal, transparent layers with hidden text, are overlaid one atop the other, yet we know nothing of them because they remain permanently hidden from view, and only very occasionally, as with the Doivber Levin website, do they appear to the computer user in readable form? What if there are many of these “adhered” layers, which our eye is not capable of perceiving? . . . And what if we're walking around with myriad overlays of breathing texts? What if we're human beings with actually living, or revisions of ourselves about which we know nothing?

Elsewhere, this could easily come across as the well-what-if-everything's-really-just-text musings of the kind of M.F.A. novel that might actually bill itself as “a story about how stories come to be written.” But there's nothing delightful or exciting about it for Ugrešić: the stakes are too high, and it comes from too much personal, political, and historical suffering. It isn't *fun* any more. The narrator's restless travelling and obsessive reading turn her into a kind of Oedipa Maas figure, equally spooked by the possibility of system and the possibility of its utter absence. Of the Doivber Levin mystery, she writes, “So what if Doivber did survive and turn up elsewhere? Just maybe, he turned up *everywhere else* on earth?” Here, escape, or a miraculous persistence, is explicitly framed as an imaginative response to unimaginable terror.

That terror isn't safely relegated to history, either. As Ugrešić makes clear, her trips around Europe only return her persistently to the frontiers of new forms of violence. At a pretentious conference in Spain, improbably named after Holden Caulfield, she encounters the vast oblivion and catastrophic self-regard of the global rich. Back home, and in her travels amongst the Croatian diaspora, she feels the constant threat of resurgent fascism, like the mines that her friend in the countryside still digs out of the ground. Reflecting on the neighbourly atrocities of European history, she sees the same bestiality rising again across the continent.

Writing, however, is wholly inadequate to the situation. In a book haunted by the refugee crisis, a short passage towards the end reflects with incredulous disgust on the cultural assimilation of suffering—on migrant narrative rendered as *migrant chic*. *Fox* puts to rest flattering nostras about the healing power of Art because for all the generosity of this book—and it's an improbably generous one, a vast downloading of passionate obsession and joyful trickery—it doesn't want you to feel cleverer or more virtuous for having read it. The attention it demands in reading is the same furious, unsentimental, wary, and committed attention it wants you to pay to the world. It goes out raging. ♣

[Click here to read Dubravka Ugrešić's essay, “Unhappiness is Other People,” also translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac, from the Spring 2018 issue.](#)

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