

BOOK REVIEWS

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Nataša Kovačević

AMERICAN FICTIONARY

Dubravka Ugrešić

Celia Hawkesworth
and Ellen Elias-Bursać, trans.

Open Letter Books
www.openletterbooks.org/products/
american-fictionary
200 Pages; Print, \$15.95

“Shrink,” one of the essays in the collection *American Fictionary*, imagines Dubravka Ugrešić’s consultation with a shrink while she is in the US as a visiting professor in the early 1990s. Ugrešić hopes the shrink will help her deal with the trauma of the war unravelling her former country, Yugoslavia, but the shrink, unfamiliar with most of her cultural references, repeatedly asks for clarification, which results in more unfamiliar references and prevents her from getting to the “fundamental source” of Ugrešić’s frustration. Ultimately, Ugrešić says the problem is her hallucination that Yugoslav destruction and carnage have reached the US as well: “I walk down Fifth Avenue and suddenly see the buildings toppling like houses of cards.” She worries the war in Yugoslavia may become a global virus: “But what about the virus? What if at this moment, while the two of us are talking, the Empire State Building is tumbling down! And you say everything will be fine!” “You yourself know that’s impossible!” replies the shrink.

Reading this book after 9/11, the wars that ensued, and endless mass shootings in the US brings Ugrešić’s point home. In the “PS” to the *Fictionary*, written for this, revised, 2018 edition, Ugrešić observes that we are all now living with the daily violence of war. I first read this book under a different title and in the wake of a different war: *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream* (1994). At the time, I was writing about the 1990s Orientalist discourses on the Balkans, revived by the wars of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. The first English translation did not capture the BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) original — *Američki Fikcionar* (1993) — because, Ugrešić observes in “PS,” her editor argued that nobody would understand the word “fictionary.” The history of the book’s publication in English itself seems to reflect the cultural misunderstandings and mistranslations that inform the author’s experience of the US depicted in the essays. The cover of *Have a Nice Day* featured, puzzlingly, a person wearing a Mickey Mouse mask, and occasionally the author would locate it in a bookstore’s “humor section,” despite the book’s profound focus on war and loss. But I found the subtitle most jarring: the phrase “Balkan war” not only associated a specifically Yugoslav war with the rich history of Orientalist stereotypes about the Balkans, but also suggested that war could only be fought “over there,” far from the American dream.

Ugrešić’s essays react precisely to US indifference to Yugoslav wars, as well as to the recycling of Balkan (and broadly Eastern European) stereotypes in the US, while at the same time

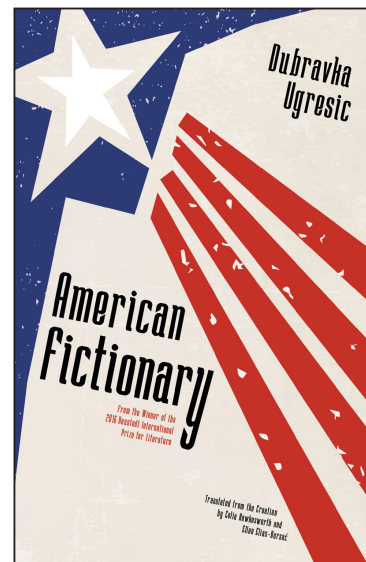
drawing unexpected parallels between the US and Yugoslavia. When the war started in 1991, Ugrešić first left for the Netherlands and soon thereafter for the US, and the essays were initially commissioned as a regular column for a Dutch newspaper (hence, a Dutch translation preceded the first English one). Setting out to write an American “dictionary” of sorts for her Dutch readers, she says she mistakenly typed dictionary as fictionary, and thus the original title was born. She concludes that this is a perfect title for a book about a disappearing country, however, since Yugoslavia, “like Atlantis...moved into the *Dictionary of Imagined Places*.” But in addition to archiving the Yugoslav referential field destroyed by the war, *Fictionary* also documents contemporary American mythologies, organized around cultural keywords. For Ugrešić, “American culture is fabulistic”: the media, film industry, and public debate transform current issues into collective myths, which end up informing “behavior, attitudes,” [and] “new laws.”

The essays explore the cultural meanings of keywords such as “The Organizer,” “Manual,” “Couch Potato,” “Contact,” and “Comforter,” among others, through a double-exposure perspective of a Yugoslav refugee, who compulsively challenges what she sees as the US “dictatorship” of happiness and optimism. The essays are both melancholy and humorous, as the refugee “misfit” tries to buy into

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American mythologies, but repeatedly fails. Images of Hollywood-designed happiness, touchy-feely sentimentality, and a “better attitude” to life remind Ugrešić of communist-era spectacles of totalitarian happiness. She is puzzled by the American genre of collective autobiography, revolving around highly publicized personal confessions, unknown in totalitarian societies. She declares America the land of organizers, which she finds helpful because she is a “walking, talking chaos,” but then analyzes organizing as also the principle of war and ethnic cleansing, as in Yugoslavia, where any excess was being “liquidated” at the time. Her “destructive and cynical mind” similarly criticizes the obsession with manuals as a distinctly American genre, which carries the promise of cracking the labyrinth of life and getting to the desired goal, as in a video game. As she, too, tries to jog and exercise, she muses on the American obsession with a healthy body and longevity as a goal in itself, without wondering about the point of extra years or health, much like the obsession with networking and “having contacts” as a goal in itself, without wondering about their purpose.

Emotionally paralyzed by the Yugoslav disaster unfolding on the TV screen, Ugrešić becomes a “couch potato,” reflecting on the repetitive chorus “stay tuned” as another goal in itself. In this nightmarish TV democracy, everyone is entitled to the same number of seconds before being entirely forgotten, as the world slides



“serenely into a white hell of indifference.” The realization of one’s insignificance and peripheral status is further enhanced by Ugrešić’s references to former Yugoslavs’ desire to have their war misery recognized by Western media. Over the phone, her mother persistently asks, “So do they know about us there? Are they writing about us?” However, the images of war that Ugrešić sees in the media — “desperate, wretched, disheveled people, their eyes wild” — only serve to strengthen the “myth of the wild Balkans.” In various interactions, Ugrešić herself figures as a mascot of Balkan and, broadly, Eastern European communist otherness: “a dangerous lot,” “the scourge of civilized Europe.” The irony is that, although Western media expect the Yugoslav war to live up to the Balkan myth, the warriors themselves live out the American myth: Croatian soldiers model themselves after Sylvester Stallone, while Serbian paramilitaries from the Knin stronghold are nicknamed “Kninjas.”

So, what does it mean to revise and republish this book a quarter century later? In the closing “PS,” Ugrešić notes that the new version drops a few essays, adds another, changes opening mottos, and updates translations. While the overt goal might be to encourage “a new reading of the earlier text, a dialogue between two moments,” the elusiveness of the exact two moments, given Ugrešić’s peripatetic reflections on various spells in Croatia, the Netherlands, and the US frustrates such a mission. Instead, I prefer looking at this book as simply perpetually unfinished: a fictionary, like a dictionary, is an open-ended genre, like “any text that has ‘lexicographical’ pretensions, even when they are tongue-in-cheek.” In the time elapsed between the two English editions, nonetheless, Ugrešić went from being a Yugoslav writer who left her country to escape the wartime nationalist euphoria to an internationally recognized author, who recently won the Neustadt International Prize. Her writing has thematically moved away from a sense of agonized attachment to her disappearing country and towards considering the Yugoslav tragedy in postcommunist and European Union-

— Kovačević continued on next page

accession contexts, as well as to broader questions of migration, multiculturalism, consumerism, and the literary market industry.

While *Fictionary*, however, is historically situated in a very particular context, it still reflects the recurring features of Ugrešić's style: the free mixing of fiction and non-fiction, author and character, seriousness and humor. She repeatedly declares the various decisions made about the essays as accidental, implying that everything about them, especially the author, is unreliable. The only running feature is, perhaps, the "scattered," vignette-based style, appropriate for a book written at a time when, Ugrešić says, "all my words scattered." Both her style and observations about US culture recall Theodor Adorno, another essay enthusiast, especially his vignettes in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951). While Adorno can never be as lyrical and playful as Ugrešić is in her essay about the differences between bagels, doughnuts, and muffins, for instance, his statement that "every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated" looms large in *Fictionary*. Its first-person protagonist is often described as "neurotic," "disabled," or "convalescent," as somebody who moves through hallucinations and double exposures, and for whom

the contours of the material world are fragile. In a 2015 interview in *Music & Literature*, Ugrešić in fact references Adorno — his observation that "heresy" is at the essay's "essence and core" — to explain her own predilection for this genre. It has been a form appropriate to her consistent work of cultural critique, especially since the 1990s war, "to protest against human conformism, lies, killings, national and ethnic homogenization of the society" and "trivialization and standardization of culture." She turned to the essay at a "crucial moment" when things "desperately...needed to be explained," although those explanations earned her the reputation of a heretic in newly independent Croatia.

In the context of the open embrace of nationalist euphoria in the US, Ugrešić's work of cultural critique gains fresh relevance. Just as her word "dreamers," denoting all the immigrants in New York City, gains fresh connotations post-Trump: "New York is not a city of dreams, it is a city built by us, the dreamers." Already in the original version, Ugrešić, exile-flâneur, declares her enchantment with the vibrancy of New York, appropriating it as a city of "us" and not "them," joining its collective imagined community of immigrants. In the revised version, she states that of all the world's cities New

York makes her feel the least lonely. Consequently, she proposes a new fictional entry: the word "island," specifically Roosevelt Island, once home to a jail that imprisoned anarchist, feminist, anti-capitalist, lewd, and otherwise unruly women. This, then, is Ugrešić's double-exposure perspective on New York, which seems to be the greatest promise of America: a dreamy, longing gaze at Manhattan from the island; a reluctance to leave the island of misfits where one feels at home.

Nataša Kovačević teaches postcolonial literature at Eastern Michigan University. She is the author of two monographs, Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization (2008) and Uncommon Alliances: Cultural Narratives of Migration in the New Europe (2018). Since 2018, she has worked as editor of the Journal of Narrative Theory, an international, refereed journal of literary and cultural studies.

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humanistic inquiry. The search for the lost poet is akin to the search for identity. Whether we imagine the act as translation, or the process of psychoanalysis, it is a poetic quest. "What is the purpose of poetry," Rosenberg continually asks. The answer is that "it teaches us how to live in a poem.... You could turn it around and say the purpose of life is a poem. Not only a journey through time, from birth to death, or through the stations and roles we assume, or a journey to knowledge. Instead, a poem for which

no explanation, however brilliant or nuanced, is a final answer." Rosenberg's memoir, in other words, demonstrates the impossibility of adequately capturing or recovering a life without imagining it as a poetic activity.

Daniel Rosenberg Nutters earned his PhD in English from Temple University in 2017. His writing has

appeared in symploke, The Henry James Review, Arizona Quarterly, American Book Review, and other venues. He is currently completing a two book project: The Humanist Critic: Lionel Trilling and Edward Said and Unlikely Humanists: Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, and J. Hillis Miller.

WONDROUS WORLDS

Stephanie Rauschenbusch

CONTIGUOUS STATES

Richard Levine

Finishing Line Press
www.finishinglinepress.com
65 Pages; Print, \$18.9

SELECTED POEMS

Richard Levine

FutureCycle Press
www.futurecycle.org/Default
141 Pages; Print, \$17.95

Both of these books by Richard Levine are wonderful and full of wonders. Many of the poems are about Vietnam, the actual fighting and walking in mud, and seeing death all around. One of the best is "Beauty on the Wing," quoted here in full from *Contiguous States*.

The one time I saw a bird alive in Vietnam
it was in a cage. A large, white cockatoo
bobbing up and down and giving off a cry

you might
call human, if you'd never heard a human
cry.

The cage was suspended from the branch
of a dead tree by a wire — that one loosely
wound
loop was all that kept the spoon-handle of
a grenade
from flying off to eternity. Anyone

fool enough to pull on that cage
would become one with the bird
and the spooky trail we stalked along,
inhaling
what had defoliated a hectare of jungle.

We were trained to ferret out malefic toys
and tactics, but the rhythm of boredom
and sudden death, the spooling, upland
trails of a thousand
tense steps when you didn't die made for
carelessness.

Even those hiding near in wait, who saw
you

reach for their ruse, were surprised
to see how even in hell nothing moves
as easy as beauty on the wing.

This poem is so exquisitely well-written, in an order so logical and clear, that its ending is completely devastating. The bird is an irresistible trap, so obviously dangling along with a grenade that no soldier should be tempted by it.

The poet has walked this "spooky trail" himself and been taught to "ferret out malefic toys." He and the Vietcong are shocked to see this trap work so well. There's a gliding sureness to the language of this poem and a tremendous skill at withholding the grisly details of the ending. We the readers must imagine what is left of the hand and the body that reached out to this bird, if only because beauty was nowhere else to be found.

Another poem, "Convoys", shows a Vietnam veteran drinking in Brooklyn with the poet to inebriation ("we could not walk / but like crabs" and reliving "Homeric stories of cowboys, churning up / and back the corrugated dirt of Highway one... from Phu Bai to Dong Ha, / Hue to Con Tien, /

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