

# TANK Magazine/ Book issue 2021

First published in 2018, Dubravka Ugrešić's *Fox* is an unacknowledged masterpiece of European literature. A foray into myth, exile and the endless quest for home, *Fox* emerges as a story forever chasing its tale in rewarding and revelatory ways. Ahead of TANK's limited edition re-release of this under-appreciated gem, author Lisa Appignanesi introduces us to Ugrešić's singular brilliance.

## Lisa Appignanesi: The many varied tricks of Dubravka Ugrešić

Pleasure is a category we often forget to mention when considering a writer of the stature of Dubravka Ugrešić. Yet it is the sheer pleasure of reading that takes me over whenever I'm confronted by a new volume of her work.

Playfulness is key here. Like an ingenious juggling child, Ugrešić enjoys tossing a rainbow assortment of balls into the air. Some fly off to explode the oily cynicism of bloated nationalist tyrants; others land in the fertile garden of fairy tale and savvy women's wisdom; still others roll onto the rocky terrain of exile and a melancholic longing for a home that has ceased to exist. Yet still she continues juggling, never ceasing to surprise with her variety of voices and literary registers. When her play takes on a devilish edge, the balls hit at the very core of our comforts, not only the shallow delights of our burgeoning digital media, but the comfort of literature itself and its possible endurance.

Setting out to check on a date, I happen upon Ugrešić's website. There's mischief there, too. The home page announces the displacement of the author the site purports to introduce, all the while interrogating the notional purpose of a writer having a website. The text is worthy of citation.

Who knows, maybe one day there will no longer be Literature. Instead, there will be literary websites. Like those stars, still shining but long dead, the websites will testify to the existence of past writers. There will be quotes, fragments of texts, which prove that there used to be complete texts once. Instead of readers there will be cyberspace travellers who will stumble upon the websites by chance and stop for a moment to gaze at them. How will they read them? Like hieroglyphs? As we read the instructions for a dishwasher today? Or like remnants of a strange communication that meant something in the past, and was called Literature?

Just after I finish reading this, I get a phone call from a man who identifies himself as being from Yonder Solutions. For a moment I have the distinct feeling that Ugrešić is having a little fun with me in the high-spirited vein of her 2007 novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*. In a *London Review of Books* article in 2009, Marina Warner, a long-time aficionada of Ugrešić's work, situated her fiction "in the tradition of upside-down, modernist myth-making or ironical fable" and described it as: "Skittish at times, affectionately comic, and lavish with improbable and ingenious fairy-tale plotting."

Ugrešić's work and its trenchant wit is underpinned by the scaffolding of exile, both geographical and linguistic. She sees herself as writing in a language that is officially defunct, killed off by the creation of an independent and nationalist Croatia during the 1991–1995 war that saw not only Yugoslavia dismantled, but also its language, Serbo-Croat, banned. Her earliest fiction dates from before independence, including her first work to be translated into English, the innovatively parodic novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, in which characters think in different styles – the heroine is distinctly Woolfian, the detective Chandleresque.

The new Croatia turned to its earlier brief period of independence during the Second World War to find its right-wing politics and symbols. The regime labelled Ugrešić unpatriotic; she was vilified, hounded as a traitor, called a witch, forced from her university post and into exile. Settling in Amsterdam, the condition of exile continued – and continues – to identify her and to rankle with her over 20 years later. In *Fox*, she writes:

Didn't I leave then, forsaking my home and crumbling domicile because the air was so thick with hatred that it couldn't be breathed? [...] Didn't my friends write me off, watching silently – as the powers-that-be batted me about? [...] Didn't the booksellers refuse to display my books for years on their shelves? Didn't the journalists follow my every – barely published – book with a tomb-like silence or fling their inflated, ignorant bile at it? Had any of them ever apologised for the long years of loathing? Wasn't it they [the young], obediently upholding the rules they'd inherited in the vicious social games, who erased me from university curricula, secondary-school reading lists, anthologies, textbooks, publishers' catalogues? What about my colleagues, editors, publishers? [...] There was not, apparently, a list of authors and books explicitly slated for destruction, but the literary tastes of the zealous Croatian librarians concurred. It was mainly books by Serbian authors that were jettisoned: books printed in Cyrillic – even ones by Croatian authors; books by "Yugoslav" authors; books by "left-leaning" authors; books by communists and anti-nationalists.

In this vehement register, Ugrešić reminds me of another central European great, the satirist Karl Kraus, whose apocalyptic play and masterwork, *The Last Days of Mankind*, features scabrous exchanges between his fictional alter ego, the Grumbler (der Norgler) and the Optimist, the bourgeois nationalist, who really can't see what's wrong with the First World War.

A novel from Ugrešić is never univocal and her translators David Williams and Ellen Elias-Bursac have here once again brilliantly captured her range. Fox is abundant and not only in fabled declensions of the sly, bushy-tailed and sometimes hunted creature itself. Ugrešić, the mordant essayist, the author of *Nobody Home and Karaoke Culture*, among other notable volumes, is here, too. So too is the literary scholar, versed even in the most minor figures of 20th-century Russian experimentation. Holding all the voices together is the reflective memoirist and the consummate storyteller, who plies her oft-itinerate trade in a variety of fairgrounds, from conferences to literary festivals.

Ugrešić was writing auto-fiction before the term went into wide circulation. Now that the memoir has grown to include so many literary adventures, particularly from women, some might be tempted to apply it to Fox. The novel is in part a journey back to a home that isn't and into a childhood – both Ugrešić's own and that of her niece – where stories and the playful language in which to make them may well originate. As in her earlier, riotous *Baba Yaga Lays an Egg*, the depredations of age come in here, too.

With its cleverness, its imaginative and resourceful cunning, its many varied tricks, the fox, or rather the vixen, is the perfect icon for Ugrešić's writing. "There is much that qualifies the fox as totem of the traitorous literary guild," she notes wryly, agreeing with the Russian writer, Boris Pilnyak, whose "Story about How Stories Come to Be Written" marks a first metafictional point in this foxy narrative. Russian authors, including Mikhail Bulgakov, take many a bow here as they emerge from near-secret burrows.

Pilnyak's story is about a beautiful Russian girl enamoured of a Japanese writer – perhaps Jun'ichiro Tanizaki – who turns her into fiction without her knowing. Ugrešić, long an acerbic commentator on the place of women and women writers, notes that there's an "almost inviolable template" passed down like a hereditary illness through classics written mostly by men but also by women, which defines how heroines must act so that we recognise them as such: "she must endure a trial of some humiliation or another in order that she might win the right to eternal life. [...] The Mysterious Him [...] will put a spell on her, subjugate her, humiliate, and betray her."

Ugrešić's search for the origin of story in *Fox* trips along, taking us on forays to Naples and Pompeii to London and Kolkata. All travel increasingly induces melancholy and a longing for a return to a home that is as fugitive as the bushy tail the fox chases. When home or at least a place of origin is on the horizon, Ugrešić, with another mischievous chortle, offers us a moving mature romance in the "autobiographical" vein – whether true, partially true or not at all, only she can tell us, though I certainly believed it as I read. The story, a riff not only on the subject of home but on the underpinnings of women's place in fiction, was sparked by the Pilnyak story about where stories come from and begins with the author being left a house in the countryside outside Zagreb in the will of an unknown fan. Mysteriously, the house is "haunted" by a stranger of the author's generation and political stance. Like all romance, this one too, is bedevilled by mortality. I won't spoil it by saying more, but if anyone has ever wondered whether Ugrešić could write more conventional fiction, here's the proof.

Worrying about the disappearance of literature, both generally and her own, Ugrešić leads us onto the terrain of the Soviet avant-garde collective Oberiu, which flourished briefly in Leningrad in the late 1920s and early 1930s, mostly in cabaret and performance, before its members were silenced by Stalin's terror. It was influential for unofficial Soviet art of the 1970s. Ugrešić goes in search of a particular member, one Doivber Levin, whose traces are so few that I thought he might have been invented by Ugrešić as a playful authorial stand-in, in the style of a Nabokovian footnote (the butterfly hunter also appears in a memorable episode in *Fox*). Ugrešić credits Levin with a vanished manuscript, a Chagall-esque fantasy that unfolds in a house on the ground floor of which "lives an ordinary Soviet official, while on the floor above lives a mythological creature with the head of a bull. Only the ceiling separates the two epochs, modernity and antiquity, linked by the author's whimsical fancy". I rushed to Google (another of Ugrešić's satirical targets) to find a "real" trace of Levin; there he was. So she had not invented him – but the next results belonged to her...

An anxiety of disappearance greater than the fear of mortality echoes through *Fox*. Yet, as Ugrešić's small niece teaches her (and us), if stories are legion, they nonetheless need their tellers. They coalesce through their narrators, and their tellers, like Scheherazade, are always at risk.

There may be no place like home – especially when you can't find it – but Ugrešić has certainly found one in literature, which occasionally, at least, transcends frontiers. ●