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**REVIEW ARTICLE**

**DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ:  
AN AUTHOR IN SELF-IMPOSED EXILE**

by

**Antonia Young,  
Colgate College and University of Bradford.**

**Titles**

*Baba Yaga Laid An Egg* (trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac, Celia Hawkesworth, Mark Thompson).  
Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009.

*Nobody's Home* (trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac). London: Telegram/Saqi 2007; Open Letter Press,  
University of Rochester, 2008

*The Ministry of Pain* (trans. Michael Henry Heim). London: Saqi, 2005; New York: Ecco  
Press, 2006.

*Lend Me Your Character* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim). Dalkey  
Archive Press, 2004.

*Thank You for Not Reading* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Damion Searls). Dalkey Archive  
Press, 2003.

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). London: Weidenfeld  
and Nicolson, 1998; New York: New Directions, 1999.

*The Culture of Lies* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1998; The  
Penn State University Press, 1998.

*Have A Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth).  
London: Jonathan Cape, 1994; New York: Viking Penguin, 1995.

*Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (trans. Michael Henry Heim). London: Virago Press,  
1991; Northwestern University Press, 1993.

*In the Jaws of Life* (trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim). London: Virago  
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*In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories*. Northwestern University Press, 1993.

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For millions born in Yugoslavia before 1980, the events of the 1990s have had a devastating effect. Some may feel better off in the long term, most have additionally

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suffered personally from the loss of one or more close relatives. Literature will certainly reflect many more of these stories. Dubravka Ugresić is a Yugoslav writer, very deeply affected by the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and one who is able to express her feelings of trauma more articulately than most. This trauma is all the more accentuated by the fact that anyone thought to regret the collapse of Yugoslavia is often considered an enemy of democracy. Maja Jaggi noted in her interview with Ugresić for the *Guardian Saturday Review* (23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2008), ‘For her, the so-called Yugoslav war was a fascist struggle for new borders, its winners powermongers, mafiosi, criminals, war profiteers’.

As a successful young writer, Ugresić won her first major award at the age of 22 (for the best Yugoslav children’s book of the year). After writing two more children’s books, she moved to fiction, short stories and novels, for which she received several nominations as well as some prizes, the most coveted being the NIN-award for best novel of the year (1988); in this, she was the first woman to win. Having studied in Moscow she developed a particular interest in Russian avant-garde culture. Ugresić co-edited the international scholarly project *Pojmovnik ruske avangarde* (*A Glossary of the Russian Avantgarde*), for several years. She received another four awards in Yugoslavia, and went on to receive awards and nominations from at least eight other countries.

As many as nine of Ugresić’s books, published between 1992 and 2008, are available in English (most of them translated by Celia Hawksworth or Michael Henry Helm). In various ways she portrays her intense feeling of loss of homeland, and disgust for what she feels is expected of her as a ‘Croatian writer’. It was only with the fall of Yugoslavia and the growth of Croatian nationalism that her rejection of being labelled Croatian grew. Ugresić had no desire to hide this rejection, which in turn forced her to leave the country. Thereafter, never apparently feeling at home anywhere else, never finding ‘that exile means freedom from enforced identification’ (*The Culture of Lies*: 238), Ugresić settled both in the US and in Amsterdam, only returning to her native Croatia for brief, and apparently fraught, family visits.

Dubravka Ugrešić’s, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (translated by Michael Henry Heim, Virago Press, London, 1991) was first published in Yugoslavia in 1988. The novel is based on an international literary conference held in Zagreb, ‘involving espionage, sexual intrigue, murder and a good deal of one-upmanship ...

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comment on the limitations and absurdities of the literary profession, a masterly model of post-modernist theory and supremely entertaining work' (as the book is described on the fly-leaf). Ugrešić's *In the Jaws of Life* followed, a year later, in 1992. The book's title is that of the first of three short stories. Had the writer known what was to come, she might not have made such fascinating art of portraying the tedium of ordinary life through extraordinary fantasy.

Her *Kultura lazi*, (*Culture of Lies*, 1998) which the author writes as a 'self-defence by footnote', won the Dutch Resistance Prize in 1997 and the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 1998, and has been named as a major work of literature (Meredith Tax of *The Nation*). An autobiographical work, in which she describes herself as always an outsider, and which she returns to after a 5-year interval, relates something of her educational primer, as she started school in 1957, to unite the brotherly hearts of Serbs and Croats. Ugrešić explains the lack of an early alternative literary culture, such as existed in so many Eastern European countries, by the lack of a Yugoslav culture. Yugoslav writers, she notes, made no impact on the world. She has something more sinister to tell (writing in the 1990s) of the national dance, the 'kolo': danced in a ring, she notes that this turns to a noose, by which all are killing one another in the wars waged by men. She compares the kitsch of Tito's era (pictures of the great leader giving mandarins to children) with the kitsch of the 1990s: 'theatricalisation of death', and 'kitsch propaganda of war' (53). She observes the political changes in Croatia, the rising nationalism, anti-Byzantinism (slight disguise for anti-Serb sentiment), and lack of protest when only pure Croats could take on teaching posts. Lies became a norm in order to preserve national superiority. A television call to duty, asked all Croats to write to their friends abroad denouncing 'Yugosnostalgics'. Certain writers were erased from anthologies. The word 'Yugoslavia' became forbidden (and erased from all textbooks) (108). Historical facts underwent re-assessment. There was place only for one truth, which included the manipulation of personal trauma. Critical Croatian journalists all lost their jobs. One of the many lies presented is the idolizing of a Croatian pop-singer who, driving too fast, killed two in another car, as well as himself, the two were not even named in the newspaper reports; but demands were made to name streets after the singer. (140–41).

In one of the last chapters of this book, 'The Confiscation of Memory', Ugrešić relates her collecting of 'mental souvenirs' from life in former Yugoslavia

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(the theme of her later book *The Ministry of Pain*), noting the ‘untranslatability’ of nostalgia. She also explains what was so appealing to Westerners about Eastern Europe: it allowed Westerners to appreciate how much better their own lives were, they could appreciate the melancholy, the poverty and shortages, and the otherness, yet did not need to suffer the desolation of having no alternative. At the same time, the visiting Westerner could claim to visit, understand and report on those difficulties and hardships.

*Have A Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream* (1995): grippingly written, this book gives brief vivid pictures of Ugresić’s intense feelings as she experiences the extraordinary and extreme contrasts of her recent life in a country at war, and her present as a lecturer in Middletown, Connecticut, amongst people so far removed from her recent past that her mode of perceptively drawing attention to these contrasts portrays to the reader the absurdity of daily American life. She takes features of American life, for example in a chapter entitled ‘Homeland’, she brings together women, who like herself, are from the former-Yugoslavia (but from other of its constituent parts). These are women all of an age that they can remember growing up with a comfortable home-life, in a secure environment, with a gradually improving economy, only to become aware later that the country is not so stable, and then to become embroiled with nationalist wars from which they are totally alienated. Brought together in the US, it becomes evident that these former compatriots are compatriots no longer. Her chapter on ‘Harassment’ shows with deadpan craft, the absurdity of US leaflets on sexual harassment.

*The Ministry of Pain* (2005) clarifies the effect of the new political order in Croatia:

... another thing we had all been deprived of was our right to remember. With the disappearance of the country came the feeling that the life lived in it must be erased. The politicians who came to power were not satisfied with power alone; they wanted their new countries to be populated by zombies, people with no memory. They pilloried their Yugoslav past and encouraged people to renounce their former lives and forget them all. Literature, movies, pop music, jokes, television, newspapers, consumer goods, languages—we were supposed to forget them all ... the remembrance of life in that ex-country, became another name for political subversion.(57)

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This book also brilliantly weaves together all Ugresić's memories of the pre-war Yugoslavia in which she grew up, with the memories of younger exiled Yugoslavs, her student on a contrived course on 'Yugoslav Literature' (*jugoslavistika*), which 'disappeared as a discipline together with its country of origin' (40) at a University in Amsterdam, with a conclusion that 'death had lost its power to shatter' (23). Also interwoven are the effects both of the course and the memories of them all, on one another. She found that being a refugee, for men, made them into invalids, whereas it forced women both to remain in the background, but also to keep life going. For all of them the claim was 'it's not my war'. Ugresić portrays the many different behaviours which developed among the refugee students, some submerged into silence (especially if they had been drafted into any of the wars of which they felt to be no part). All felt deprived of their country, language, family and friends, thrown together like convalescents. The university instructor of the course did her best to make it an exercise to help them all heal, but apparently had the opposite effect, even upon herself:

Our young men are wild and sullen, full of anger. At night they converge in the concrete wasteland like packs of stray dogs and let off steam till the small hours .... Our young men are quick with their knives: their knives are extensions of their hands .... And they always run together, in a pack, like village curs.

Our young women are quiet. That their very existence is an embarrassment to them shows clearly on their faces. Hair hidden under kerchiefs, eyes fixed on the ground, they slip through the city like shadows. If you happen to see one in a tram, she will be hunched over a prayer book chomping the sacred syllables like so many sunflower seeds. She will soon alight, looking neither right nor left, and scurry off, still mouthing the text, her lips in constant motion, like a camel's. (221)

Other established Croatian writers of similar age, especially women, found themselves equally ostracized for their anti-nationalistic stance after Croatia's declared independence. One in particular is Slavenka Drakulić, was forced to emigration by serious attacks, both written and physical, for her 'unpatriotic' writing. Drakulić, now lives in Sweden but regularly visits Croatia. She is especially known for her *How we survived communism and even laughed*. This book results from many interviews she made with women in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, and expresses

her rather similar attitude to her country of birth (though with more humour) to Ugresić's. She was amongst five such writers to have been labelled 'witches' under the Tadjman regime. In 1991 the same regime welcomed back with honour, from long-term emigration, Dinko Sakic, notorious Second World War Jasenovac concentration commander. It has been a tremendous hardship for intellectuals from all over former-Yugoslavia, feeling stifled even if not persecuted in any of the newly formed nationalist states that were the six Federal Republics of Yugoslavia.

**About the author**

The author trained as an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley. She is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Research Unit in South East European Studies in the Peace Studies Department, University of Bradford. She is also a Research Associate in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Colgate University, New York. Antonia Young is co-editor with John B. Allcock of *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons, Women Travellers in the Balkans* (1991 and 2000) and compiler of the annotated bibliography *Albania* (World Bibliographical Series: ABC-Clio Press, 1997) as well as being author of *Women who became Men, Albanian Sworn Virgins* (2000 and 2001). The author has served as an expert witness on numerous asylum cases, and as OSCE Supervisor for many international elections, mostly in the Balkans. She is President of the Cross-Border Balkans Peace Park Committee ([www.balkanspeacepark.org](http://www.balkanspeacepark.org)). Her e-mail address is [a.t.i.young@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:a.t.i.young@bradford.ac.uk).