

Trivial Pursuits

Daniel Bouchard

**THANK YOU FOR NOT READING:
 ESSAYS ON LITERARY TRIVIA**

Dubravka Ugresic
 Translated by Celia Hawkesworth

Dalkey Archive Press
<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com>
 220 pages; paper, \$13.95

Dubravka Ugresic bemoans the idea that a book's packaging, such as blurbs, are even more important than a book's contents, but the back-cover teaser that tells us *Thank You for Not Reading* is "a biting critique of book publishing" did not fail to get me interested. In fact, it helped get me past the ironic title as well as the (perhaps ironic, perhaps misleading) subtitle: *Essays on Literary Trivia*. The 32 essays and stories gathered here in seven sections are not trivia even if Ugresic seldom fails to treat lightly whatever subject matter is at hand. Whether it's Joan Collins at a book fair ("trivia has swamped contemporary literary life"), the bad dreams of a writer (she has nightmares until she quits writing for waitressing: then, happy dreams), a parody of book proposals (Proust could not get published today, nor Joyce), "how-to" books on writing for writers, and so on, Ugresic never fails to distinguish between the farce that a writer's material conditions for creating too often are made of and the dreadful void that occurs when the commissioners of literary culture allow authors to wallow, books to vanish, and literature to die.

The theme of which words make it (and how) and which do not (and why) is constant in Ugresic's collection, as is the pursuit of who has the power to publish and promote. She must think about these things all the time. One of the best illustrations is her discovery that "socialist realism" is virtually identical to contemporary self-help books. The former was driven by ideology, the latter by the market. Literature is not dead then, and certainly not interest in reading. Only good taste appears to have died, or is it the good writer's power to attract a mass of intelligent readers? "To be successful, market literature must be didactic," she observes. "The American best-seller *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* has roughly the same healing effect on the American black oppressed female proletariat as Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother* once had on its."

Of course literature is about more than healing. But the market heels at what is profitable and therefore stops at publishing no-names who simply want to write good books. This connects to

another preoccupation: a writer's cultural capital is negligible, except in the envied instances of becoming an "unavoidable literary reference"—the foundation of eternal life for one's reputation—and also that anybody with fifteen seconds of fame to bank on can also write a book and receive far more money and attention than the professionals. In this category are Ivana Trump, Kirk Douglas (candid enough to admit he does not actually write his own books, but just shares his thoughts with an assistant), war criminals, movie stars, star athletes, and Joan Collins. She writes, "I have little prospect of ever becoming a soccer player, but every soccer player can easily occupy my territory, literature." This is not a question of fairness, but reflective fodder for Ugresic's satire. She uses these anecdotes, like Twain, to present. Like a stand-up comic, she keeps the moralizing to a minimum, using another writer's gripings to underscore the intrinsic atmosphere of the profession:

He does not believe that all these 'colleagues' have the same rights as he does, that in the world of literary democracy everyone is equal, that everyone has the right to a book and to literary success. He does not, however, abandon the hope that (literary-history) justice will prevail in the end, that the very next day everything will resume its place, that the housewife-writers will stay housewives and fisherman-writers fishermen. He has nothing against democracy itself. On the contrary, coming from where he has come from he is the first to recognize its value, but not in literature and art, for God's sake!

Without financial success, without fame, Ugresic herself gives many glimpses into her own situation. Psyching herself up for a meeting with an editor (who presumably holds all the cards), she whispers to herself, "I am a writer! I am a writer! I am a writer!" Writing is not, finally, a believable occupation. But all rejections and slights are slyly worked into her oeuvre. In the preface she admits that she "wrote some of the essays under the mask of an Eastern European grumbler confused by the dynamics of the global book market." This is a telling statement that helps bridge the insights Ugresic gives us into Western literary culture ("I have read your manuscript," an agent writes her, "It is an elegant, unusual and unconventional work. In other words, it would be hard to find American publishers who would buy such an essentially 'European' work.") and also that of her native land: "I am neither an émigré, nor a refugee, nor an asylum-seeker. I am a writer, who at one point decided not to live in her own country anymore because her country was no

longer hers."

How Ugresic's country (the former Yugoslavia) was taken from her and how it treated some of its artists, including her, make for some of the most compelling reading the book has to offer. And the narratives underscore the larger theme of deliberate loss throughout: of libraries, culture, lives, and taste. While real-life atrocities across the world should have the world's ear in counteracting their repeated occurrence, too much of the world is luridly drawn to the fictive perversity where writers "compete to invent the most sinister or shocking story" so that, finally, "we can easily imagine a contemporary reader sitting in pools of real blood, on a heap of real bodies reading a novel about human perversion with rapt attention." Meanwhile, the shock of reality is at risk of being lost.

I know an editor who became chief of police and a professor of aesthetics who became a paid state military adviser. I also know of several thieves who became humanists and several humanists who became thieves; writers who became war criminals and war criminals who became writers. I even know of writers who have been erased from literary life because they wanted only to be writers.

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And what can a writer do but write? Ugresic, critique in hand (and, now, in print), also has a mission. "The literary market does not tolerate the old-fashioned idea of a work of art as a unique, unrepeatable, deeply individual artistic act. In the literary industry, writers are obedient workers, just a link in the chain of production," she says. Her job is to reunite culture and labor, to help reduce the isolation between reader and writer caused by the profit demands of the market. A Herculean task, to be sure, but not one to be undertaken with too somber a countenance. After all, a "fun-loving culture has taken over the world." And literature, as Ugresic's provocative humor demonstrates, does not have to sit in storage waiting for a neat resurrection. It begins to prop itself back to a position of power simply by poking fun at the forces that unwittingly destroy it. It's as old as Boccaccio and Chaucer, as entertaining and stimulating.

Daniel Bouchard lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His first book of poems, Diminutive Revolutions, is available from Subpress.