

Fox Context and Discussion

Discussion Zoom link: <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674>

Synopsis

Dubravka Ugrešić's *Fox* (2018) is, according to its back cover, a "novel that reinvents itself over and over". . . "using the duplicitous, shape-shifting fox of Eastern Europe as a motif." Densely populated by writers, real and fictional, and foxes, actual and totemic, the novel grapples with the question: how do stories come to be written? Or, alternatively, how do stories come into being? Or, to paraphrase the title of the work by the (fictional?) character Irina Ferris, how is life translated into a story and vice versa?

Author Background

[This section is largely taken from two recent interview-based articles on Ugrešić and her work, [Nina Herzog \(2019\) in TinHouse](#) and [Christopher Byrd \(2018\) in The New Yorker](#).]

Following degrees in Comparative and Russian Literature, Ugrešić worked for many years at the University of Zagreb's Institute for the Theory of Literature, successfully pursuing parallel careers as both a writer and as a scholar. In 1991, when war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić took a firm anti-war stance, critically dissecting retrograde Croatian and Serbian nationalism and the stupidity and criminality of war. In the process, as she discusses in Part 3 of *Fox*, "The Devil's Garden," she became a target for nationalist journalists, politicians, and fellow writers. She was publicly declared a witch, along with several other prominent feminist authors, including Slavenka Drakulic (who is perhaps the person obliquely mentioned in *Fox* as her "clearly more popular colleague" [201]).

In September of 1991, she went to meet with her publisher in Amsterdam. It was meant to be a one-week trip, but as she followed the news about the war reshaping what had been Yugoslavia, she decided that, rather than return home, she would go straight on to the United States, where she was to begin teaching at Wesleyan that winter.

Ugrešić lives in Amsterdam in self-imposed exile or emigration. Her books have been translated into over twenty languages. She has taught at a number of American and European universities, including Harvard, UCLA, Columbia, and the Free University of Berlin. She is the winner of several major literary prizes, including the 2016 Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Translator and Special Guest Background

Ellen Elias-Bursać is an American scholar and literary translator. Specializing in South Slavic literature, she has translated numerous works from Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. She previously worked in the English translation unit of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). She holds a PhD in philology from the University of Zagreb.

Aside from *Fox*, which she translated along with David Williams (he did Part 1, she did Parts 2-6), Elias-Bursać also translated Part 1 of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2010), two books of essays in full (*Nobody's Home* [2008] and *The Age of Skin* [2020]), and some of her translations were included in *Karaoke Culture* (2011). Elias-Bursać also edited *American Fictionary* (originally published in 1993) when it was reissued from its original edition (called *Have a Nice Day*) and translated a few new pieces for the new edition.

In addition to her prodigious work as a translator, Elias-Bursać is also the author of *Good People in an Evil Time: Portraits of Complicity and Resistance in the Bosnian War* (Other Press, 2005, with Svetlana Broz and Laurie Kain Hart); *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Textbook: With Exercises and Basic Grammar* (2010, with Ronelle Alexander); and *Translating Evidence and Interpreting Testimony at a War Crimes Tribunal: Working in a Tug-of-War* (2015). She has won a number awards for her work, including the 2013 Independent Foreign Fiction Readers' Prize for her

translation of *Trieste* by Daša Drndić and the 2015 Mary Zirin Prize from the Association for Women in Slavic Studies for *Translating Evidence and Interpreting Testimony at a War Crimes Tribunal*.

Themes

- Mediocrity and posterity--who is remembered and why? The Widow tells Ugrešić's narrator, "The great names of art survive thanks to the trivial; the artwork by itself is clearly not enough" (73).
- Beauty--from the "famous Croatian woman poet" who loses her beauty and her place in the world, transformed into a witch who uses her goiter to pick lottery numbers, to Van Gogh's art, the book has an uneasy relationship with beauty.
- Backsliding--what does it mean to lose or find one's proper place in the world? Bojan goes from judge to de-miner. The Widow is adored because she knows "her place."
- Home--migrants, refugees, and others with peripatetic lives recur throughout the different parts of the novel. From Sophia Vasilyevna Gnedikh-Tagaki to Vladimir Nabokov to Ugrešić's narrators, who are forever suffering from back pain on planes or trains or staying in hotel rooms or embassy attics, the problems of surviving exile or finding an alternative home (or homeland) persist. At the close of Part 4, the narrator concludes, "The world is a minefield and that's the only home there is."
- Anger (and its gendered dimensions)--Ugrešić's narrators (who we keep struggling, though mostly futilely, to keep separate from the author herself) are frequently losing their temper and, almost as frequently, apologizing. Resentment, towards "business-class writers" and, perhaps especially, business-minded people in the "creative industry," seems to animate them.

Questions

- What makes a fox a fox?
- How do stories come to be written?
- What are the major elements that we find repeated or revisited throughout the novel? What purpose(s) do they serve?
- What do we make of the epigraphs? Including the opening one by the probably fictional Ferris?
- What does it mean to be immortalized as a footnote?
- How do we know what is fact and fiction in this book? Given Ugrešić's reflections on the answers we get from Google ("weightless, unreliable, and fluid" [193]), is it even "our place" (as her readers) to try and find out?

For Further Reading

[An Archaeology of Resistance \(PDF without paywall\)](#)

This recent piece by Ugrešić, also translated by Elias-Bursačić and published in the *New York Review of Books*, focuses on the trauma of losing one's homeland and witnessing a thoroughgoing and often violent historical revisionism. The piece gives us some insight into the author's roots, literary and otherwise, sketching out her fox origin story. Finally, an element from *Fox*, a part of the Bulgakov quotation that appears on page 200, reappears (uncited) in this essay: *manuscripts don't burn*.

[The History of Resistance: An Exchange \(PDF of article not behind a paywall\)](#)

Following their publication of the above article, the *NYRB* published a response by Austrian historian of Eastern Europe, Ulf Brunnbauer, and Ugrešić's response. Brunnbauer takes issue with Ugrešić's interpretation of the memorialization of fascism in Yugoslavia. He is harsh in his criticism of Ugrešić and her response is equally scathing. We wonder if, and in what animal form, he might make it into a future Ugrešić novel!

[Calvert Journal review of Fox](#)

This review takes up some of the questions that we pose to you! It also notes, "although [Ugrešić] calls herself an 'economy-class writer,' she's become a cult figure in post-Yugoslavian literature."