

MY HUSBAND - Context and discussion themes.

For Melikian Center reading group, at <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674>

Thursday 29 October 2020 at 12 noon AZ time: offered by Keith Brown and Borce Arsov.

My Husband is a set of eleven short stories by Rumena Bužarovska, a Macedonian writer and translator who is on the faculty at the University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje. (She has also taught Macedonian at the Critical Languages Institute). Rumena's work has attracted critical acclaim in Europe and the US; she was named as one of 10 "New Voices from Europe in 2016, and participated in the Iowa International Writing Program in 2018. She has also been centrally involved in political activism against authoritarianism in Macedonia.

In comments delivered in Iowa in 2018, she highlighted her view that politicians have exploited "the insecurity of the average Macedonian and their overwhelming inferiority complex;" and acknowledged that some criticize her interpretation of her country's complex history and identity.

<https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/9.7.18%20Buzarovska%20Arts.pdf>

There are surprisingly few reviews published in English of her work. The Amazon site includes an excerpt from a review attributed to Teofil Pančić, Globus, which concludes

"..that type of material is here - brought to light by the dark, carefully shaded places of foremostly (sic) human, not exclusively female existence, in such a way that the reader is at the same time necessarily frightened and thrilled by what's in front of them: first because of what they recognize in themselves and those close to them, and secondly because... let's say because it has never been brought to light in that way."

In an email exchange, Rumena herself is interested to hear what the group makes of what she calls the "grotesque sex scenes" (thinking especially of the last story, "the Eighth of March").

In that story in particular, a university professor, married contentedly to a police officer, embarks on an affair, as if she feels it is demanded of her. One line on page 123 stuck out.

"This is what cheating is like. A car. Darkness. Alcohol."

Some of the themes that stood out across the stories to us were:

- How characters see themselves as having few choices; and their actions and fates determined by the past. In "Genes" the narrator's husband extends this to national character.
- Generations closely entangled in complex relations of love, hurt and trauma, and in which husbands' expectations and demands are jagged and toxic. For example, in different ways, in both "Adulterer" and "Father."
- The tragic weight of lying and deceit; nowhere more so than in "Lily."

Some questions to kick off our discussion:

- (From Borce) - Rumena Bužarovska is one of a generation of new Macedonian authors who write in a style that we might call "brutally realistic simplicity" – especially apparent in "The Eighth of March." Would you agree with that term from your reading of the English translation; and what is the effect?
- (From Keith) Were you, like Teofil Pančić, "frightened and thrilled" by any of these scenes or characters' actions or thoughts? What other responses did you feel?

- (From Keith) In her comments in Iowa, Rumena quoted Flannery O'Connor (whose stories she is currently translating into Macedonian). In "Writing Short Stories," O'Connor wrote:
"An idiom characterizes a society, and when you ignore the idiom, you are very likely ignoring the whole social fabric that could make a meaningful character" (104).
What do you recognize in the characters in *My Husband* who, like all of us, carry multiple identities (they are female, married (or widowed); Macedonian (in all cases but one); mothers (mostly); urban)? What, if anything, is baffling or mysterious?