An interview with Dubravka Ugrešić

Henry Ace Knight

Photograph by Shevuan Williams

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Henry Ace Knight is the interviews editor for *Asymptote*.

One would be hard-pressed to find a novel more true to its title than Dubravka Ugrešić's Fox*, published in English last year by Open Letter Press and translated from the Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać and David Williams. The eponymous spirit animating the novel—"the writer's totem"—is perhaps the only thing it remains true to. Vulpine in style, form, and narration,* Fox *is an unrelenting evasion, seducing but refusing to meet the reader's gaze, edged with a tragicomic humor, bracing erudition, and raging pith that makes being given the slip great fun.*

In his review of the novel (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/dubravka-ugresic-fox/)for the July 2018 issue of Asymptote*, which bears reading in its entirety, Peter Mitchell calls* Fox *"cunning in the sense that a finely made piece of jewelry or a precision piece of engineering is: densely patterned and recursive, turning intricately back on itself, and resolving order out of apparent chaos."*

Ugrešić braids together semi-autobiographical vignettes—waxing dyspeptic about the "economy-class" writer's fight for purchase in the modern world; episodes of historiographical metafiction—acquainting us with the fates of

such footnotes to literary history as the Russian avant-gardists who fled Stalin for the Far East, and a librarian who chauffeurs the Nabokovs on a road trip across the American West; and bursts of essayistic digression—on everything from mythology and film, to war, nationalism, and exile, to the perversions of the publishing industry and the marginalization of women writers. For those familiar with Ugrešić's work, the scope of ambition and formal range on display here come as no surprise.

Unlike some metafictions, this is no cloying paean to the Disneyfied magic of narrative. It is a novel in revolt against itself, something resembling a metafictional civil war, a grim fable in which literature itself is both wary fox and sick lion. Fox *purports from its earliest pages—even earlier, in fact, from the dust jacket—to be a "story of how stories come about." But with a novel as boobytrapped as this one, any straightforward profession of what it's up to is the surest evidence that the story is up to something else entirely, or at least something more. What* Fox *really seems to be after is this: At what cost do stories come to be written—for author, subject, and reader—and to what end?*

For Ugrešić this is a loaded and deeply personal question, inflected by the pain of her own story. Among the preeminent writers of the late former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić was driven into exile from Zagreb in the 1990s by the newly independent Croatian regime, which dubbed her a witch for mocking the nationalist hysteria of the time.

Shortly after Croatia declared independence and the war escalated, she packed her bags, in September 1991, for a short trip to Amsterdam to meet with her publisher. Slated that January to be a visiting lecturer at Wesleyan University, she delayed her return to Zagreb, nauseated by the war, and opted after several weeks in Amsterdam to go directly to the United States.

There she wrote a regular column for a Dutch newspaper called "My American Dictionary," chronicling her impressions of American life. These essays later became the collection American Fictonary*, first published in 1994 under a different title and released in a revised edition by Open Letter Press last September. Structured as a dictionary comprised of entries on various dimensions of Ugrešić's experiences pendulating between Wesleyan and New York City, the collection furnishes mordant insights into the absurdities of American life still fresh twenty years hence.*

For her total body of work—which includes seven books of fiction and six essay collections— Ugrešić was the recipient in 2016 of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, referred to by some as the American Nobel. She was a finalist in 2011 for the National Book Critics Circle Award and a nominee in 2009 for the Man Booker International Prize. Though she has maintained residence in Amsterdam since the late nineties, she resists categorization as either a Croatian or Dutch writer, preferring to identify as

a- or post-national.

Ugrešić and I met in Brooklyn last year after a reading and discussion occasioned by the release of the revised edition of American Fictionary. *We corresponded over email in the winter.*

—Henry Ace Knight

In your Neustadt Prize lecture, you describe an early childhood deprived of simple toys. The factories had more important goods to manufacture. In lieu of the customary doll, you grew up with books, the radio, and Hollywood movies—"the text, sound, and image gave me the illusion of flight from my provincial little town into the grand, thrilling world." Which stories were most formative for you at that time? Which gave you this abiding sense that the world was grand, thrilling?

The question about childhood background—social, cultural, and even political—is extremely interesting, but it is difficult to give a reliable, accurate answer. Once I tried to recall the memory of my first idea of beauty. I remembered how I was enchanted by a postcard from "another world" with a colorful drawing of a basket full of flowers. The postcard was sprinkled with sparkling golden stars. My first idea of beauty is almost identical to my niece's: things must be pink and sparkling in order to be beautiful.

Our memories of what has been formative for us change. The facts might be the same, but the way we see them changes within time. Let me give you an example. Today I think the fact that we didn't have many toys was not the catastrophe it seemed before. We, the girls from my childhood, made the dolls ourselves. For this "operation" all we needed was a little bit of cloth and the essential crayon with a soft purple heart. That's why our dolls had purple eyes, purple mouths, and purple eyebrows. When I got my first "real" doll, I didn't like it. It was too "realistic" and I was a bit afraid of it. It was not "the idea of a doll," but just a doll.

Today I think that the deficit of picture books in my early childhood was not such a tragedy either. My mother would fill in that "empty space" by telling me stories about her family. She had six aunts and they were the main characters of her stories. I remember how I was enchanted by listening to tales of their lives, their marriages, their children, and their (always inferior!) husbands. These family stories were yeast for my imagination.

My mother's sense of humor was formative too. My mother's empathy towards female characters, no matter where they came from, was infectious. Hollywood

movie stars and their lives retold to me by my mother blended with my favorite Greek myths. Slavic fairytales blended with the stories about my mother's aunts.

Can you find a messier and better way to raise your daughter? The sense that the world is grand came to me from listening to the radio at night. That was a real thrill, to listen to so many languages I did not understand.

"A naive person, unburdened by cultural prejudices, could conclude that I come from the epicenter, the very heart of postmodern culture," you write in *Thank You for Not Reading*. "They would be wrong, but at the same time equally right." Can you elaborate a bit on this duality?

I can't recall now my exact thoughts. With the fall of Yugoslavia and the war, I experienced the crash of old hierarchies and the relativization of all values. I found myself in a "postmodern" mess. Centers, epicenters, and peripheries are changeable. That's the rule of a healthy cultural dynamic. Quite often these processes do not depend on political constellations. Or do they? Let me give you a couple of examples. "Jeans prose" in the 1960s—whose hypothetical father was J. D. Salinger with his *Catcher in the Rye*—was pretty popular in the Soviet Union and other countries of the Soviet bloc, maybe even before Salinger was properly translated into "local" Slavic languages. The same type of narration and the narrator's mindset were popular in the sixties in Yugoslavia.

The question is: How do literary influences travel? Or do they not travel at all, but surface at the same time in different places? What can we say about the unique absurdist writing in Russia (Daniil Kharms and others) that appeared at the threshold of Stalinism? Did this appear on the cultural periphery or at the cultural epicenter? The unique "school" of excellent children's writing (Dušan Radović) and the production of wonderful children's picture books and magazines in Yugoslavia in the seventies—what was it? Periphery? Or center? I would say epicenter, but nobody would believe me.

The categories of center and periphery are imposed by the marketplace, much more so today than ever before. The free marketplace is often, if not always, a result of political constellations. The relationship is not one-sided. The marketplace also builds political constellations. The marketplace establishes cultural values. The marketplace is the trickiest ruler of our time.

Later in your Neustadt lecture you describe coming to feel "the certainty that literature was autonomous and that the only thing worth dedicating myself to was literature." Can you describe when and how you first arrived at this sense of certainty?

I learned about the autonomy of literature as a student of comparative

literature. It was the intellectual mantra at the time. It meant that literature should stay away from any social or political purposes, from normative aesthetics (such as socialist realism), that literature should not allow itself to be instrumentalized in any way, that it should fight any form of censorship, oppression, or manipulation. It was a different time, with different preferences and different rules. However, it was a time when literature belonged to serious matters and dedication to it was treated as a serious professional choice.

Today many of the literary notions belong to history, the notion of literary autonomy included. Does this mean that the literature of today is autonomous? I don't think so. I think literature today is exposed to different dangers that are not perceived as dangers. The notion of kitsch has disappeared from our vocabulary too. Does it mean that kitsch has vanished from our cultural environment? I don't think so: we are exposed to it more than ever before. We just do not perceive it.

The central theme of your Neustadt lecture was the erosion of the "continuity of literary evaluation." You ended on a somewhat optimistic note, citing Nabokov's line that the major writer must be "a storyteller, teacher, and enchanter," and calling the Neustadt festival a gathering and celebration of enchanters, past, present, and future. What other intangibles—beyond storytelling, teaching, and enchanting—do you think are essential to the serious writer?

First of all, what does this mean: A *serious writer*? Any writer will claim that he or she is a *serious* writer. Their fans will confirm. Today we are surrounded by a culture of self-emancipation. That culture pushes the idea that man is invincible, one can do anything in this world, which consequently divides us into "winners" and "losers." Without interactive media this formula would not so efficiently infect and "emancipate" zillions of people (predominantly young ones).

The new culture of self-emancipation and self-expression is quietly destroying the old schooling system and its importance. At the same time, it is emancipating zillions of kids who can't afford any other way of schooling than the Internet.

In that respect, anybody today can be a writer, painter, artist, philosopher, thinker, and even a filmmaker. Technology has expanded the meaning of these words. Thousands and thousands of new writing species have appeared with the new media—from "YouTube writers," bloggers, and vloggers, commercial writers and writers of commercials, and authors of YA literature (who are YA themselves), all the way to the so-called "serious writers."

The family of writers today has zillions of members. The old-fashioned *serious* writer is just one tiny part of that family. The meaning, image, and position of

the author was changed by the Internet, by the new technological gadgets, the new demands of the ever-hungry marketplace, the new consumers. All in all, the writer's environment drastically changed. There is a rich network of creative writing schools. No longer are they connected with well-known universities. Today there are many "independent" writing schools financed by the industry, companies, banks, or other financial sources. Who teaches creative writing in such schools? Who is responsible for the education of future writers? Who are the publishers today? Who are the editors? Who are the booksellers? Who are "literary influencers" (to use a "YouTube" word)? Who decides what is going to be "cool" this year in literature and what will be the literary "coolness" of tomorrow?

The borders between "serious" and "other" writing are not strict anymore. Within the realm of "serious literature" there are so many decently written books and it has become quite difficult to distinguish a masterpiece from a fake. Nobody dares to do the job of literary evaluation anymore. Why? Because the book industry can't live on masterpieces. It lives on standardized products, like any other industry. We—the writers, readers, editors, publishers, agents, booksellers, professors of literature—are all exposed to the rich and unstoppable production of books. We end up with the feeling of "satiation." Thank you, we're full! However, "satiation" could be just another word for emptiness. That's why today almost every book with a little bit of "seriousness" is proclaimed "brilliant." We've ended up with "brilliance." The question is: Can we ask for more?

The margins of my browser and my Instagram feed have been haunted recently by a very depressing targeted ad for a smartphone app that promises to "fit reading into your life." "Read four books a day or even more with the Blinkist app," it impels. By which it means listen to audio recordings, fifteen minutes each in length, summarizing recent nonfiction releases, exclusively nonfiction, with the dismissive subtext that fiction is utterly useless and unworthy of your time. We are past the age of speed-reading classes, it seems. No one has the time or the attention span anymore to read even self-help manuals in full. The ad cites a statistic about the voluminous reading habits of top business executives and alludes to the dedicated reading practices of corporate moguls like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. It promises users the full experience of Stephen R. Covey's 400-page *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in a summary that can be parsed in fifteen minutes or less. I don't doubt that the main ideas of these books can be distilled into fifteen-minute sound bites; they're little more than lists to begin with, after all.

I bring it up because I think the ad synthesizes so many of the perversions you've identified in contemporary reading culture in

one grotesque microcosm. The corruptions of the commercial book market, the predominance of this self-help ethos, and the crisis of authorship in the digital age are central concerns in your essays. What do you make of this notion that simply retaining "the key ideas" (whatever those might be) of a book now constitutes actually "reading" it? That those "key ideas" hold value only insofar as they can be regurgitated in a corporate boardroom context? That "reading" is something to be done between the "events" of work and life, and for no other reason than to imitate the icons of corporate power (which seems like yet another cringeworthy extension of *Karaoke Culture*—copying the reading lists of moguls like Gates and Zuckerberg and processing them in 15-minute easy-to-digest blurbs)?

I recently learned about some apps produced by writers themselves. There is an app, for instance, that is supposed to help a writer deal with writer's block. I have been writing about changes in literary culture, in the culture of reading, for years. *Thank You For Not Reading* and *Karaoke Culture* deal with such themes. The commercial cultural marketplace is aggressive: it will use anything to survive and stay well and alive: it will suck the strength and strategies of its "enemies."

Here is a nice example about the perversities connected to the new buzz, the "culture of reading." Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović has participated on several occasions in public readings dedicated to children's books, organized to popularize the importance of reading. Recently President Grabar-Kitarović honored a local writer, a woman who wrote a book about recent war atrocities. The writer vividly describes how Serbian killers were torturing innocent Croats. The same woman was, herself, accused of war crimes, and twenty-four witnesses, mostly Serbs, claimed that she tortured them in the infamous prison of Lora, in Split. However, that woman managed to escape all court proceedings. Moreover, she was even honored by President Grabar-Kitarović for bravery in the recent war, and she was also given two local literary prizes from her right-wing literary pals. All in all, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović promotes the "culture of reading" in an environment where the average monthly salary is barely 500 euros, where the number of jobless people is frighteningly high, where the price of the Croatian translation of *Alice in Wonderland* is close to 20 euros, and where some of the "esteemed writers" are war criminals.

In conversation with Verbivoracious Press in 2016, you described the crucial problem of international literature as "not the discovery of works of untranslated authors, but how to ensure a more sustained interest in authors and their body of work, how to slow this crazy and at the same time indifferent cultural production and consumerism, how to rediscover and reread classical authors, how

to raise the standards of reading and understanding the text, how to reconnect cultural 'consumers' with cultural history, in other words, *how to develop a culture of reading*." What do you think can be done on this front?

We are really living in a cultural mess caused by technology, e.g. by easy and quick production, by industry, by a lack of censorship and serious evaluation. This mess is extremely pleasurable, of course, but also difficult for getting oneself oriented. Reading is no longer a moment for contemplation but a moment of quick consummation. Contemporary classics are so quickly and easily forgotten. Recent literary stars such as Roberto Bolaño, for instance, shine until the next morning. We push book overproduction and that's why books are easily forgotten.

Literature does not exist only because some people like to write and others like to read. It is a system that was built for centuries and we must be very careful not to destroy it.

In the same interview you describe literary activism as a project intended to "usurp our comfortable and rigid mainstream opinions, to shake up our literary tastes and standards, to promote unknown writers and neglected literary territories." Can we think of translation, then, to the extent that it cross-pollinates literary cultures otherwise divided along national lines, as inherently a gesture of literary activism?

Translation is in principle a gesture of literary activism. But sometimes behind that "cross-pollination" we can find the organizational fingers of a state (literally) and a smart "foreign" publisher who are out to make money on "national pride." Sometimes small nations, e.g. their ministries of culture, or state agencies for culture, would pay a French publisher (for instance) to translate and publish their greatest national writer. But then the choice of writer is the state's. I had in mind literary activism in wider proportions. It is a cultural activism that comes from resistance to the literary mainstream and many of its forms. It is a difficult activity because the marketplace would, without any moral or other concerns, incorporate such resistance and its impacts into the marketplace's system.

What is your relationship like with your own translators?

I can only follow the process of translation into the languages that I know, and not always. Some translators prefer not to be in contact with the author. Some translators are excellent in finding the author's mistakes, like my Swedish translator Djordje Žarković. Some translators are fascinating erudites, like the late Michael Heim. Some of them are wonderfully collaborative, like my English translator and good friend of many years, Ellen Elias-Bursać. My

experience with translators is mostly positive. Translators are my friends, like Dorota Jovanka Mentzel, my Polish translator, or Roel Schuyt, my Dutch translator. Translating from a small language is anything but a profession. It might be a curse. In any case, one does this difficult and underpaid job out of enthusiasm and love for the writer's work.

In September, Open Letter Books released a newly revised edition of *American Fictionary*, twenty-five years after its original publication, translated in part by our own Ellen Elias-Bursać. Can you tell us a bit about the reissue: What occasioned it, what changes you've made from the original, what has been excised or added?

The idea came from Chad Post, who is not only an editor I have known for a long time, but a person who, believing in me and my work, became a loyal publisher and friend. Chad is the director of Open Letter Press, a small and independent publishing house. He published my new novel *Fox* and reissued *American Fictionary* last year. I thought that reissuing an old book would be risky, but Chad ignored that. The book appeared under its original title of *American Fictionary*. I also wrote a postscript, dropped one essay which I no longer liked, and replaced it with one that I preferred. In the process of preparing the reissue I realized we can't change much: if you pull just one brick the whole construction can fall apart.

American Fictionary has proved its durability, I guess. Most of the newer readers didn't even notice that the book was actually published long ago. The book was actually translated by Celia Hawkesworth. Ellen Elias-Bursać only translated the new pieces. I am very happy with the result. *American Fictionary* is actually a "love song" dedicated to the city that I love the most, New York.

One of the things I find most striking about *American Fictionary* is the juxtaposition of New York and the sleepy Connecticut backwater of Middletown (a half hour drive from where I grew up). You've said that, "The only place where I could become more or less a poet is New York, not in Europe. In Europe I'm a political thinker, an essayist, a fiction writer." What is it about New York that gives you this feeling? What is it about Europe that forecloses your poetic side?

New York is not a city, it's a condition. New York elevates you; it makes you better, more energetic. New York galvanizes you. It arms you with fresh senses, it opens your eyes. It also does something to your body, to your physicality; it makes you younger, tough, but at the same time it makes you older, it also makes you different.

Was it in some ways liberating to you as a writer to be unmoored

from the expectations of national literature, to become trans- or post-national? In *American Fictionary* you write, "I believed a writer should have no homeland or nation or nationality, a writer must serve neither Institution nor Nation, neither God nor the Devil, a writer must have only one identity: his books, I thought, and only one homeland: Literature."

I have always been free. Don't forget that national literatures (especially small ones) never expect anything from women writers, because women writers simply do not count. There are expectations for men writers: men writers are part of the national canon, men writers build the canon, men writers receive national prizes, men writers write the great national novels, men writers are the opinion makers, men writers write columns, men writers are given membership in national academies and institutions. Women writers are just more or less tolerated. It's a shameful constellation but nobody sees it as shameful, not even women themselves, be they writers or readers. My freedom is dangerous, risky, but also indescribably pleasurable. In that respect, yes, I enjoy my trans- or post-national position, and I have only one true homeland: Literature.

"Sometimes it occurs to me that books are a little like physical pleasure," you write in *American Fictionary*. "If we could really remember physical pleasure, we probably wouldn't need to repeat it . . . It is only books that give me pleasure that I forget. Nearly all of them. I retain a hazy memory of individual episodes, but I absolutely can't recall what the book was really like." What are the books that you return to most often?

I always thought about myself as an undisciplined, messy reader. As a student of comparative literature, I had to obey assignments and reading lists and learn how to be a disciplined reader. However, I always liked a lazy reader's freedom; I like when the book seduces me, when I find myself in its thrall. I like that powerlessness, when you have to admit that you were enchanted and that you "lost your mind." That is the feeling I have reading Vladimir Nabokov on Gogol, when a great reader, like Nabokov, bows before a great master, Gogol.

The books I return to most often are classical works of literature. These encounters look like random meetings with old friends one hasn't seen for a long time. Sometimes such meetings bring you tremendous pleasure and you promise you will meet more often. And you really do. Sometimes such meetings leave a bitter taste in your mouth. "Yes, of course," you say, "I'll call you soon." And you don't.

I have found no better description of Donald Trump than the passage you excerpt from Paul Fussell's *Bad* in the section of *American Fictionary* on kitsch: "Something phony, clumsy, witless,

untalented, vacant, or boring that many Americans can be persuaded is genuine, graceful, bright, or fascinating." What better logic to explain his rise to the presidency?

I agree with you totally. But, it would be easy to say that this is only Donald Trump and only America. It is happening everywhere. The world sometimes resembles a post-utopian dream. In this dream people are overdosing on the TV show *Big Brother*. Only shows like *Big Brother* keep them alive. They want their politicians to look and talk like people on *Big Brother*, they want their families to look like people on *Big Brother*. They are not able to understand and enjoy anything else except—*Big Brother*.

You've said that in an age when anyone can write, the literary work ethic is what lends a writer authority. Can you expand on what you mean by the literary work ethic, what that entails to you?

When it comes to work ethic, I should avoid sounding like the American Eagle, the one from the Muppet Show. Is this cultural reference still recognizable? What I mean by the literary work ethic is the notion of a literary apprenticeship. A literary apprenticeship is an old-fashioned but good way to learn something useful about the writer's trade, such as discipline, modesty, respect for all the people included in the process: teachers, librarians, booksellers, editors, proofreaders, translators, readers, critics, and so on and so forth. In some of my essays I allowed myself to be pretty harsh concerning the many perversities of my trade, but I love my writerly "family." I love writers because I deeply understand their vulnerability. And when I learn how to understand their vulnerability I also learn how to accept my own.

What is your workspace like? In what conditions do you do your best writing? With a bagel and a cappuccino close at hand?

I have a small study in my apartment in Amsterdam. I am used to it. I like to write at home. I have had the experience of writing in writer's retreats too. Such places, at least in my case, have worked. I found them inspiring and useful. I can't write in cafeterias, trains, airplanes, etc. I can dream in such places, but not write.

"What saves a life is daily routine," you write in the opening entry for *American Fictionary*. What is yours?

I like assignments. A regular column, for instance, can save a writer's discipline and sense of daily routine. It works for me, at least. Whenever I have been invited to write on a regular basis I have felt happy and a little important too. Like a grade-A student. All these things connected with work might be explained by gender differences. Women through history have not developed a sense of "a mission." And this little but crucial deficit has had a huge impact on

women's self-esteem. All the things women have done have come from a sense of boredom; all the things men have done have come from a sense of mission. Male writers wake up in the morning with their sense of mission, I guess. They think the world will die if they do not personally write their ten pages per day. Women think how to feed the kids, what to cook, how to put the house in order, and then, when there is nothing else to do, they are free to write. I don't do all that stuff, I am probably caring for the memes of my gender. In that respect, I don't feel I have any mission. I don't intend to conquer the world or write the great national novel, certainly not a Croatian one. Can't do that stuff in the morning! First a bagel and a cappuccino and then we'll see what we're going to do with the world.

Let Dubravka Ugrešić introduce you to Croatian novelists (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/dubravka-ugresic-on-croatian-novelists/) in this essay translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac for the Fall 2011 issue; read Dubravka Ugrešić's nonfiction "Unhappiness Is Other People (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/dubravka-ugresic-unhappiness-is-other-people/)," translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac, from the Spring 2018 issue; and find a review of Dubravka Ugrešić's *Fox* (https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/dubravka-ugresic-fox/) (translated by Ellen Elias-Bursać and David Williams) by Peter Mitchell, also in the Summer 2018 issue.

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