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SPACES MEASURED WITH WORDS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALMA LAZAREVSKA

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I came across Alma Lazarevska's writing in [Sarajevo Notebook\(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.sveske.ba/bs/autori/a/alma-lazarevska\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.sveske.ba/bs/autori/a/alma-lazarevska) and, intrigued, I searched for her short stories. I was fascinated by her crisp, amiable prose that reaches deep and far from the once-besieged city.

Alma Lazarevska is a Bosnian-Herzegovinian columnist, essayist, and prose writer. She lives in Sarajevo, where she studied comparative literature and theatre studies at the Faculty of Philosophy. Lazarevska is the recipient of the Dušan Timotijević Yugoslav prize for her essays (1986) and the BiH Association of Writers prize for her short stories (1996). She published a collection of essays *Sarajevski pasijans* (*Sarajevo Solitaire*, 1994), a novel *U znaku Ruže* ([Im Zeichen der Rose\(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.drava.at/katalog.php?sis=f529cd463ab04017c27ccd9eb69063a9&ansicht=einzeln&titel_ID=226\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.drava.at/katalog.php?sis=f529cd463ab04017c27ccd9eb69063a9&ansicht=einzeln&titel_ID=226)); [Sous le Signe de la Rose\(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.meo-edition.eu/signe-rose.html\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.meo-edition.eu/signe-rose.html), 1996) as well as two collections of short stories—*Smrt u Muzeju moderne umjetnosti* ([La Mort au Musée d'Art moderne\(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.meo-edition.eu/mort-musee.html\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.meo-edition.eu/mort-musee.html)); [Tod im Museum für](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.meo-edition.eu/mort-musee.html)

[Moderne Kunst](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.drava.at/katalog.php?sis=212d93aa0ee9c4cbd165b01813eb0078&ansicht=einzeln&titel_ID=684)(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.drava.at/katalog.php?sis=212d93aa0ee9c4cbd165b01813eb0078&ansicht=einzeln&titel_ID=684); [Death in the Museum of Modern Art](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://istrosbooks.com/products/books/death-museum-modern-art-32/)(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://istrosbooks.com/products/books/death-museum-modern-art-32/>), 1996) and *Biljke su nešto drugo* (*Plants Are Something Else*, 2002). Some of her short stories from *Plants Are Something Else* have been translated by Cynthia Simmons in [91st Meridian](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://iwp.uiowa.edu/91st/vol7-num2/plants-are-something-else)(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://iwp.uiowa.edu/91st/vol7-num2/plants-are-something-else>) and [Absinthe](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.absinthenew.com/pages/issues.html)(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.absinthenew.com/pages/issues.html>) and *Celia Hawkesworth in Wasafiri*(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.wasafiri.org/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=373>).

We spoke via e-mail in June and July of this year.

*Alma Lazarevska**

TÉA ROKOLJ: When and how did you start writing?

ALMA LAZAREVSKA: Perhaps reading and writing are, to use physics terminology, a system of communicating vessels that starts functioning for some, and not others. That is, an intensive reader carries within herself a need, even if latent, to write. I have been a reader ever since I have known myself. I wrote and published my first short story following the completion of my studies in comparative literature. It was as if I wanted to make an organic connection with the world, which was my personal and professional choice. It was as if I wanted to prove to myself: see, I can too. After that I abstained from fiction until the time when I would share with my city perhaps the most difficult days of its history. The siege of Sarajevo. In the meantime I wrote essays and the columns intensively. And, naturally: I read and read and read. Besides having survived the siege of Sarajevo—unlike almost 11,000 of my fellow citizens—I became a prose writer. I cannot really explain why. During the siege, not only were there no computers, but there was not even enough paper for a standard typewriter. In an archive of sorts I kept copies of my older texts. So, during the siege I wrote my short stories on the typewriter on the back of my old columns. Perhaps this is not a mere technicality. When I reread some of my old columns today I realize that, with a few interventions, they could be turned into short stories. I wrote my columns at the times when editorial guidelines were rigid. You had to be linguistically and otherwise resourceful and imaginative to say some things so that the editor does not reject your text. A writer who is faced with some kind of

ensorship, even though it sounds paradoxical, has an advantage. Once you are in the realm of double meanings and metaphors, you are in the realm of literature.

Who were your most significant literary influences?

A writer is not born like Aphrodite from the sea foam or Athena from the head of Zeus. A writer carries in her baggage, even if she does not realize it, her readings. I would not talk about literary influences. That is what critics do with varied degrees of success. I can talk about the authors and the books that I love. There are no temporal limits. I find, say, Pushkin's "[The Queen of Spades](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.classicreader.com/book/2154/1/)" incredibly modern, even if it dates from two centuries ago. A true masterpiece. I love the beautiful minimalism and *zaum* of that story I would read Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," among others, during every break between two longer reads. The short stories of Bruno Schulz and Kafka's *Diaries* are always at my fingertips. I love Joyce's *Dubliners* the same way I have lately grown fond of Alice Munro, whose short story "Child's Play" has "swept me off my feet," as they say in Bosnia. I'm reciting at random. And I could go on like this indefinitely. I'm not talking about influences, but inclinations. There are writers and books that are permanent fixtures and there are those that I occasionally discover and neglect. After my studies I stopped reading Tolstoy. I thought, Tolstoy is a classic: I read and followed through on him during my studies and that was enough. Today I'm rereading Tolstoy. I consider [The Death of Ivan Ilych](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.classicreader.com/book/295/) one of the best stories that have something to tell me about death. To a writer language is a medium. In my tongue [Ivo Andrić](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivo_Andri%C4%87) is the undisputed master of language. The precision and the beauty of Andrić's language are fascinating. In a biographical note for my English-language publisher I pointed out that I was born on the 9th of March, the same day as Bobby Fischer. To use chess terminology, I would like to be at least a pawn in a language in which Andrić is the king.

Your texts abound with literary references, books as material objects, remarks about your published work.

Books are part of my universe. I always notice people with books. I cannot pass by someone who is reading without taking notice and satisfying my curiosity: what is that person reading? Those who love talking about the siege of Sarajevo always point out that, due to a lack of heating materials, Sarajevans used up books. I experienced similar

troubles during the siege, but I did not use books to that purpose. One of my favorite childhood scents is that of the first library to which I was taken.

Also, I used to love, or rather find myself, watching films. Even today I would say that I admire the Coen brothers' films, every single one. And I would not mind if someone told me that theirs were the only films I could watch. I am no longer curious in that sense. I no longer have interest in film as a medium. I love Borges' explanation that he imagines paradise (if it exists) as a big library. I emphasize Borges' "if" because it is known that he was afraid of eternity and hoped that our journey would end with death. That question also guides my own reading interests. Where does our journey end? How? Why?

In your fiction, the line between the author and the narrator is often blurry.

My choice of first-person narration is not a function of testimonial mode of writing. "I" allows for a more dynamic narration, playfulness, intimacy, etc. Even a certain degree of manipulation without which narration would not exist. Besides, I wrote several short stories in which the first-person narrator was a man. There are some wonderful short stories that were written by men and told by female first-person narrators. J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* comes to mind. The narratorial "I" may draw you into a sort of narcissism and I truly hope that I avoided that trap. I have never read of anyone attributing me narratorial narcissism. On the contrary, I always come across comments about self-irony.

You pay a lot of attention to details, the everyday and the ephemeral.

I do not hunt for sensational plots, bizarreness or subject matter. Writing, among other things, is an attempt to find the bodies for the "spirits" that I sense, to make them visible, to transport them to a different plane of existence. The flight of a bird could be a coded message. So could the arrangement of breadcrumbs on a table after breakfast. I believe it was precisely breadcrumbs on the table that were the initial spark for my short story "The Secret of Kaspar Hauser." Naturally, writing is not a mere inventorying of reality. A writer is not someone who recites what she sees and what she notices. A writer does not "take stock." She does not count breadcrumbs on a table. In that which she sees, a writer discovers a connection, reciprocity, spark, metaphysical union, etc. I often sense in a particular detail the key of a story. It happens, of course, that I do not find the door that fits that key. But it is worth trying. I love being haunted by a detail, carrying it within me as some kind of positive contagion. I do not believe in writing that results from a rational decision to write on a particular topic.

Your short stories are also rich in visual imagery, from colors, photography, ekphrasis(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekphrasis>) through spatial relations and compositions.

I have always loved photography. I appreciate it even more having discovered the importance of a record in the writing process. Over the last few years I have always been carrying a small camera with me, though not as a tourist. I take a photo and that helps me with the recall. I especially cherish the photos on which I notice what [Roland Barthes aptly calls the punctum](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic520549.files/BarthesLate.pdf)(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic520549.files/BarthesLate.pdf>). My relationship with my camera (completely amateurish!) coincides with an interest in butterflies. I learned how to photograph them. I am quite a connoisseur of butterflies. It is not only because of butterflies that I love Nabokov. His novel *The Defense* (*The Luzhin Defense*) is one of my favorite novels. But, honestly, I cannot understand that he killed butterflies. Killed, nevertheless! To hunt butterflies is to kill them. I try to understand, but I cannot. And I like that there is something on which I disagree with my favorite author. We don't have to love everything about our favorite author. And he is my favorite. I truly love his book *Speak, Memory*. It is the acme of the memoir literature. Then again, I dislike all idolatry, even where Nabokov is concerned. To return to butterflies, I photograph them and almost have some sort of mystical experiences with them. I will try to give those shape in my fiction.

Do you agree with readings of your work in the context of so-called *écriture féminine*(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89criture_f%C3%A9minine)?

I respect any attentive reading. One of my favorite lines that someone wrote about my book is: "There are books about which one talks and there are books with which one talks—Alma Lazarevska's book is of the latter kind." With that in mind, I would want that both men and women talk *with* my books. And that it makes no difference. I would also like to add, there are women writers who, one could say, write as if they think that they are being observed by a man. And there are women writers who write as if they think that they are being observed by God or whoever it is that resides above. I believe it was Brodsky who wrote that somewhere about Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova. Truth be told, to me the view from afar is more important. The most important, in fact. Whether I succeed in writing in such a manner is not for me to judge. It is interesting that *Antologija bosanskohercegovačke pripovijetke XX vijeka* (*Anthology of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Short Story*) featured 36 writers and mine was the only woman's name. The *Anthology*

was published in 2000 and I am sure that there would be more women today. There ought to be. I am not saying this out of female solidarity. I am immune to such kind of solidarity. I am saying this as a writer and as a reader.

How closely do you collaborate with the translators of your texts?

In a collaboration there should not be any arrogance on one side or the other. Translation is a joint effort to transfer a book from one coast to another. I love collaborating with my translators. Again and again, I am fascinated by the role of language. Naturally, there are also limitations, when you realize that you cannot transfer everything to the other side. It just occurred to me that diminutives are not common in English. So, you make do with that “little.” English language does not have the [dative case](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/https://classics.osu.edu/dative-case)(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/https://classics.osu.edu/dative-case>), which is very important in my short story “Plants are Something Else.” In such a case, you no longer depend on the mastery of a translator but on the constraints of a language. Behind every successful translation, there is a growing friendship between the writer and the translator.

Your book *Death in the Museum of Modern Art* was also performed: a group of Austrian artists interpreted your writing through sounds, images, and words in Sarajevo in 2011.

I like when my books reach someone and I know nothing of it. I think that is the best path for a book. And I do not like when someone forces books on me. I always say: that book will reach me when I need it. I do not know how my books had reached those artists, but they put on a performance with a visual component that I found particularly interesting. A painter worked on a single, long sheet of paper that kept unfolding vertically. She worked with a paintbrush. There was certain Japanese minimalism in her performance that I liked very much. Still, I have to admit, I feel ill at ease at events such as these. I completely gave up on public life. I just remembered that Borges’ letter to public in which he stated that he wanted to be “an invisible man.” I live in a small city where there are no “big names” or “celebrities,” but a desire for invisibility is very familiar to me.

Your novel *U znaku Ruže (Under the Sign of Rose)* deals with the life and murder of Rosa Luxemburg. What prompted you to pursue this subject?

This is an enigma to me as well. In my old files, during the siege of Sarajevo, I came across

a fact that Rosa Luxemburg's body had been thrown in a Berlin canal in 1919 and that someone had recovered it for a reward of three Deutschmarks. I became obsessed with a question: who? Who was that anonymous someone? I felt an inexplicable desire to give to that anonymous person a face and a body, to move that person from a footnote of history into a text. In the besieged Sarajevo, I cannot really explain why, I was haunted by something that happened in 1919. It is interesting how I was coming upon certain facts, illustrations, images. I was guided by intuition, unexpected details, and whatnot. I love Frost's verse: "If design govern in a thing so small." Gradually, I discovered a way to connect the details and the images to tell a story. And to find an answer to my question—who should that person be? I did not assume the position of an omniscient writer. I did not mystify. On the contrary, I emphasized at all times that it was game playing. In a benevolent sense of the word, of course.

Do you have a preference for a particular literary form?

I love the short story. As a reader and as a writer. I do not believe in the big novels unless they were written by Thomas Mann, Tolstoy, or someone from the epoch of the big novels. Today my measure of the novel is Baricco or Coetzee. I might be wrong, but I have no time for the big contemporary novels. Even more so because, on occasion, I wish to reread Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. And that takes time. I love reading diaries and letters. But not just any kind of letter or any kind of diary. I notice that letters get written today after two individuals say: let's write to each other so we can publish it later. We'll hash out all the relevant issues today, we'll hash them out in an appealing way and then we'll have them published. Even diaries are written in the same fashion. When you read Kafka's diaries and letters or Flaubert's letters, it is all very clear. That is literature at its finest. It happens that I grow fond of a short story writer. Then, he or she publishes a big novel. I try reading it and give up. Hence, the short story is my favorite.

Your essay "[Blessed Be the Day](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-07-17-lazarevska-en.html)" commemorates the siege of Sarajevo. In the European magazine *Eurozine*, the essay was presented as an implicit critique of the politicization of the siege.

I spent every single day and night of the siege in Sarajevo. My book *Death in the Museum: of Modern Art*, which was written during that time, does not name Sarajevo. It mentions "the besieged city." I did this without any clear intention, it was not a part of some plan. I

was almost unaware of it, but today in the hindsight, after much had been published on the siege of Sarajevo, I am glad I did so. Sarajevo was a word that at one point guaranteed success of a book or a text. By success I mean sales, publicity. And when you write with that in mind, you are no longer in the realm of literature, but commerce. You succumb to dictates of fashion and market. There is a beautiful scene in Jorge Semprún (who had survived a concentration camp) in which he listens intently to a fellow survivor who does not recognize him after all those years or pretends not to. Semprún listens and then responds with disappointment: "How poorly told. So very poorly told." Often there are moments in which that scene from Semprún comes to my mind. But, I wave my hand. Poorly told stories? Nothing can redeem them, not even a mention of Sarajevo.

Do you think that writers express their discursive authority or criticism more effectively via fiction?

The only thing I can tell you with certainty is that a writer must not tell lies. It is not a lie to write that you saw Martians. That could possibly be madness, quirkiness. You can make literature out of it. But not out of lies. To lie is to write deliberately in order to be liked, to sell books... to flirt with your readers... to posture for profit. One such pose is that of an authority or a critic. I try to explain writing the way one would explain if certain metal or wire is a good conductor for electricity. There are writers who are good conductors for some topics, concepts, or subject matter and not so good or completely impermeable to others. You cannot force yourself to be a conductor for a particular subject matter. Neither can you force yourself into a particular form. Fiction? If it is underway in your creative laboratory, you should not have second thoughts. Sit down and write. What is bad is to sit down and tell yourself: I am going to make up a story that will be a criticism of this or that. If a writer really wishes to criticize, then there are simpler ways. She can exercise her civic right and state her opinion directly. A writer is or at least should be an individual. The moment she stands for the collectivity, when she wants to be the voice of a nation or a community, she falls into kitsch, a narrow and reduced range of meanings and metaphors.

Can literature have a role in the recovery of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina?

The role of literature is to be literature. Besides, media attention in Bosnia is more focused on actors, film directors, the world of spectacle. Recently, actors commented more on the assassination in Sarajevo and the WWI centenary than historians.

Interestingly, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy was also in Sarajevo for the hundredth anniversary of the assassination. He wrote a play that was performed here. He was at the center of media attention. He was photographed with politicians, actors, film directors. It is interesting that he did not meet with a single writer. He did not visit the Association of Writers or Bosnian PEN.

This winter marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Winter Olympic Games, and next year it will be twenty years since the signing of the Dayton Agreement.

Yes, what you have here is the syndrome of jubilee. Outside the jubilee there is drab reality. A lot of emotions and resources get spent on the jubilees and afterward everyday life can barely function.

This year was also marked by anti-government protests in February and catastrophic flooding in May. Some commentators expressed optimism and wrote that the protests and the floods have brought people closer together and erased ethnic divisions.

Second to none, Ivo Andrić wrote about solidarity in disaster in his novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. Everything had been said there. I would not have anything to add. Disasters bring people together in the short term. After that, there is a return to everyday reality. And the anti-government protests are already yesterday's news. There cannot be an anti-government protest where ethnic affiliation is still of utmost importance.

How do you see the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

I can tell you what I see from my window, on my street, in my city, or while traveling through Bosnia. Naturally, I see a few things on TV, in the press. I never rush to conclusions. But, what I do know, what is clear, is that in Bosnia and Herzegovina extremely bad people are in power. Or groups, as a matter of fact. Ethnicity is most often the basis for group cohesion, but behind it there are self-serving interests. You mentioned anniversaries and, in the meantime, there was a commemoration of the event named by a globally recognizable term—[Srebrenica](https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srebrenica_massacre)(https://web.archive.org/web/20190325080400/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srebrenica_massacre). I hope it needs no explanation. It is appalling that the criminals have not yet been punished. There is also an

apparent tendency to mention and discuss Srebrenica for personal promotion. I pay no heed to politicians in that regard. But it is appalling that artists and intellectuals do the same. And they do! Both the local ones and those visiting us from the “big world.”

*All photos credit: Alma Lazarevska

Prostori mjereni riječima: Intervju sa Almom Lazarevskom

Pisanu riječ Alme Lazarevske otkrila sam čitajući *Sarajevske sveske* i zaintrigirana potražila sa njene kratke priče. Očarao me je njihov jedar, a opet prislan jezik koji doseže duboko i daleko iz jednom opkoljenog grada.

Alma Lazarevska je bosanskohercegovačka književnica, esejist i kolumnista. Živi u Sarajevu, gdje je završila studije na Filozofskom fakultetu, odsjek za književnost i teatrologiju. Dobitnik je jugoslovenske nagrade Dušan Timotijević za publicistiku 1986. godine, kao i nagrade za najbolju knjigu Bosne i Hercegovine 1996. godine. Objavila je kolekciju eseja *Sarajevski pasijans* (1994), roman *U znaku Ruže* (1996) i dvije zbirke kratkih priča *Smrt u Muzeju moderne umjetnosti* (1996) i *Biljke su nešto drugo* (2002). Njena djela su do sada prevedena na engleski, francuski i njemački jezik.

Intervju smo vodile putem emaila tokom juna i jula ove godine.

TÉA ROKOLJ: Kako i kada ste počeli pisati?

ALMA LAZAREVSKA: Možda su čitanje i pisanje, poslužit ću se terminom fizike, sistem spojenih posuda koji kod nekoga profunkcioniše a kod nekoga ne. Odnosno, ko intenzivno čita, u sebi nosi, makar latentnu, potrebu da piše. Ja sam, otkako sebe pamtim, bila čitač. Svoju prvu priču sam napisala i objavila baš u vrijeme kada sam stekla diploma na studiju komparativne književnosti. Kao da sam htjela ostvariti organsku vezu sa svijetom koji je bio moj životni i profesionalni izbor. Kao da sam htjela sebi potvrditi: eto, ja to mogu. Nakon toga moja apstinencija od pisanja proze trajala je do vremena kada ću sa gradom u kojem živim podijeliti možda najteže dane u njegovoj istoriji. Mislim na sarajevsku opsadu .

U međuvremenu sam intenzivno pisala eseje i kolumne. I, naravno: čitala sam, čitala,čitala...

Osim što sam kraj sarajevske opsade dočekala (za razliku od skoro 11 000 mojih sugrađana) živa, ja sam postala i prozni pisac. Zašto je to tako, ja objasniti ne znam.

U vrijeme opsade ne samo da nije bilo kompjutera nego nije bilo ni dovoljno papira za pisanje na klasičnoj pisaćoj mašini. Ja sam u nekoj vrsti svoje dokumentacije čuvala papire sa svojim starim tekstovima. Tako sam u opsadi svoje priče pisala na klasičnoj pisaćoj mašini, na poleđini papira na kojima sam ranije pisala kolumne. Ovaj detalj možda nije samo tehničke prirode. Danas kada pročitam neku svoju kolumnu ja vidim da bi trebalo učiniti par intervencija i to bi mogla biti priča. Pisala sam kolumne u vrijeme krutih uredničkih pravila. Trebalo je imati jezičke i druge dovitljivosti i maštovitosti da se neke stvari kažu, a da urednik to ne odbije. Pisac koji je suočen s nekom vrstom cenzure je, premda zvuči paradoksalno, u prednosti. Čim ste u prostoru dvoznačnosti, metaforičnosti, vi ste u prostoru književnosti.

Ko su bili Vaši najznačajniji literarni uticaji?

Pisac se ne rađa kao Afrodita iz morske pjene ili Atena iz Zevsove glave. Pisac u svom prtljagu nosi, a da često toga nije ni svjestan, svoju lektiru.

Ja ne bih govorila o literarnim uticajima. To obično rade kritičari, manje ili više uspješno. Ja mogu govoriti o knjigama i piscima koje volim. Tu nema vremenskih ograničenja. Meni je, recimo, nevjerovatno moderna (a iz pretprošlog je stoljeća!), pravo je remek- djelo, Puškinova "Pikova dama". Volim divni minimalizam i zaumnost ove priče. Salingerovu priču "Perfektan dan sa banana-ribe" i ne samo nju, mogu pročitati u svakoj pauzi između dva duga čitanja. Priče Brune Šulca su mi uvijek na dohvat ruke kao i Kafkini *Dnevnici*. Džojsove *Dablince* volim na isti način na koji sam nedavno zavoljela Alice Munro čija me je priča "Dječija igra" kako se to u Bosni kaže "oborila s nogu". Evo nabrajam nasumice i bez reda. I mogla bih tako unedogled.

Ne govorim o uticajima nego o sklonostima. Postoje pisci i djela koja su stalne tačke mog interesa, a postoje i oni koje povremeno otkrivam i zapostavljam. Nakon studija sam prestala čitati Tolstoja. Mislila sam: Tolstoj je klasik, pročitala sam ga , apsolvirala ga na studiju i to je dosta. Danas ponovo čitam Tolstoja. Njegovu priču "Smrt Ivana Iljića"

smatram za jednu od najboljih priča koje mi nešto imaju reći o smrti.

Piscu je jezik medij. U mom jeziku neprikosnoveni majstor jezika je Ivo Andrić. Preciznost i ljepota Andrićevog jezika je fascinirajuća. U biografskoj notici za engleskog izdavača naglasila sam da sam rođena 9. marta kad i Bobby Fischer i da bih, rječnikom šahista rečeno, voljela biti makar pijun (pješak) u jeziku u kojem je Andrić kralj.

Vaši tekstovi obiluju referencama o književnosti, knjigama kao fizičkim objektima, opaskama o Vašim objavljenim radovima.

Knjige su dio mog kosmosa. Uvijek primjećujem ljude s knjigama. Ne mogu da prođem pored osobe koja čita a da ne obratim pažnju i udovoljim svojoj radoznalosti: šta to on čita?

Oni koji vole pričati o sarajevskoj opsadi obavezno naglašavaju da su, zbog nedostatka ogrijeva, Sarajlije koristili knjige. Iskusila sam i ove probleme u opsadi, ali knjige na taj način nisam koristila.

Jedan od najdražih mirisa koje pamtim iz djetinjstva jeste miris prve biblioteke u koju sam dovedena. Nekada sam voljela ili možda po inerciji gledala filmove. I danas mogu reći da obožavam filmove braće Cohen, baš sve njihove filmove volim, ali ne bih se bunila kada bi mi neko onemogućio da osim ovih gledam druge filmove. Prestala sam biti radoznala u tom smislu. Za film kao medij više nemam interesa. Volim Borgesovo objašnjenje da Raj (ako ga ima) zamišlja kao veliku biblioteku. Naglašavam Borgesovo "ako" jer je poznato da se Borges bojava vječnosti i da se nadao da se sa smrću naš put završava. I ovo je pitanje koje usmjerava moje čitalačke interese. Gdje se naš put završava? Kako? Zašto?

Česte su i neodređene distinkcije između autorice i pripovjedačice.

Tamo gdje se opredjeljujem za "ja" u pripovjedanju, razlozi nisu ispovjedne prirode. "Ja" pruža mogućnost dinamičnijem pripovjedanju, igri, bliskosti itd. Pa i izvjesnoj manipulaciji bez koje nema pripovijedanja. Uostalom, ja sam nekoliko priča napisala tako da je pripovjedačko "ja" muškarac. Ima divnih priča koje su muškarci napisali koristeći žensko pripovjedačko "ja". Naumpada mi, evo, J.M.Coetzee, *Doba željeza*. Pripovjedačko "ja" može zavesti u svojevrstni narcizam i iskreno se nadam da sam tu zamku izbjegla. Nisam nikad pročitala da mi neko pripisuje pripovjedački narcizam. Naprotiv, uvijek nailazim na

opaske o samoironiji.

Posvećujete pažnju detaljima, svakodnevnici, prolaznosti.

Nisam lovac na senzacionalne zaplete, bizarnosti i teme. Pisanje je između ostalog i pokušaj da "duhovima" koje osjećam podarim tijelo, da ih učinim vidljivima, da ih prevedem na drugi nivo postojanja. U letu ptice može biti šifra nečega. U rasporedu mrvica preostalih na stolu nakon doručka. Mislim da su baš mrvice na stolu bile startno varničenje mojoj priči "Tajna Kaspara Hauzera."

Naravno, pisanje nije tek puko inventarisanje stvarnosti. Pisac nije onaj koji nabraja šta vidi i primjećuje. Pisac ne vrši "inventuru". Ne broji mrvice na stolu. Pisac u onome što primjećuje otkriva vezu, uzajamnost, varničenje, metafizičke spojeve itd.

Ja često u detalju osjetim ključ priče. Desi se, naravno, i da ne otkrijem vrata kojima taj ključ pripada. Ali vrijedi pokušavati. Volim kada me opsjeda detalj, kada ga nosim kao neku vrstu pozitivne infekcije. Ne vjerujem u pisanje koje proizilazi iz racionalne odluke da se piše o nekoj temi.

Vaše priče su i vizuelno bogate, od boja, fotografija, ekfrazе do prostornih odnosa i kompozicije.

Oduvijek sam voljela fotografiju. Naročito sam je počela cijeniti kada sam otkrila značaj dokumenta u procesu pisanja. Ima već nekoliko godina da uvijek sa sobom nosim malu kameru, ali ne iz turističkih razloga. Napravim snimak i to mi pomogne da skratim proces pamćenja. Naročito mi je dragocjeno kada na fotografiji ugledam ono što Roland Barthes odlično naziva punctum.

Moje druženje s kamerom (potpuno amatersko!) se uklopa i sa interesom za leptirove. Naučila sam ih snimati. Priličan sam poznavalac leptirova. Nisu leptirovi jedini razlog zbog kojeg volim Nabokova. Njegov roman *The Defense* (*The Luzhin Defense*) mi je jedar od najdražih romana. Ali, iskreno, ne mogu da shvatim da je ubijao leptirove. Ubijao, ipak! Loviti leptirove znači ubijati ih. To pokušavam da shvatim, ali ne uspijevam. I dopada mi se to što se u nečemu ne slažem s omiljenim piscem. Ne moramo baš sve kod omiljenog pisca voljeti. A Nabokov jeste moj omiljeni pisac. Veoma volim njegovu knjigu *Speak, Memory*. To je vrhunac memoarske literature. Ali, eto, ne volim nikakvu idolatriju pa ni prema Nabokovu. Da se vratim leptirovima. Ja ih snimam i imam neke gotovo pa mistične

doživljaje s njima. Pokušat ću to uobličiti u literaturi.

Slažete li se sa čitanjem Vašeg opusa u okviru takozvane *écriture féminine*?

Cijenim svako pažljivo čitanje.

Jedna od najdražih mi rečenica koje je neko napisao o mojoj knjizi jeste: Postoje knjige o kojima se priča i postoje knjige sa kojima se priča - knjiga Alme Lazarevske je od ove druge vrste.

Imajući na umu ovo voljela bih da s mojom knjigom pričaju i muškarci i žene. I da je to potpuno svejedno. Još bih ovo htjela reći: Postoje žene-pisci za koje se može reći da pišu kao da imaju na umu da ih pri tome posmatra muškarac. A postoje i žene-pisci koji pišu kao da imaju na umu da ih pri tome posmatra Bog ili ma ko već stanovao na nebu. Mislim da je to negdje a povodom Cvetajeve i Ahmatove zapisao Brodski. Iskreno rečeno, meni je dok pišem onaj pogled iz daljine važniji. Zapravo, jedino važan. Da li uspevam pisati na taj način, neka drugi presude. Zanimljivo je da je u *Antologiji bosnaskohercegovačke pripovijetke XX vijeka* od 36 zastupljena pisca jedino žensko ime moje. Antologija je štampana 2000. godine i sigurna sam da bi danas bilo još ženskih imena. Moralo bi biti. Ovo ne govorim iz neke ženske solidarnosti. Imuna sam na tu vrsu solidarnosti. Govorim ovo kao pisac i čitalac.

Koliko blisko saradujete sa prevoditeljima Vaših tekstova?

U saradnji ne smije biti arogancije ni sa jedne ni sa druge strane. Prevođenje je kao zajedničko nastojanje da knjigu prenesete s jedne na drugu obalu.

Volim da saradujem sa svojim prevodiocima. Uvijek ponovo budem fascinirana ulogom jezika. Bude tu, naravno i ograničenja kada vam postane jasno da ne možete baš sve prenijeti na drugu obalu. Evo mi naumpade kako engleski jezik nema deminutiva. Onda se morate snalaziti s onim little. Engleski jezik nema padež (dativ) koji je u mojoj priči "Biljke su nešto" drugo veoma bitan. Tu više ne zavisite od majstorstva prevodioca nego od ograničenja jezika.

Iza svakog dobro obavljenog prevodilačkog posla, između pisca i prevodioca se uspostavlja prijateljstvo.

Knjiga *Smrt u Muzeju moderne umjetnosti* je bila predstavljena i kao performans. Grupa austrijskih umjetnica su tumačile Vaše djelo kroz zvuk, sliku i riječ u Sarajevu 2011. godine.

Volim kada moje knjige stignu u nečije ruke a da ja o tome baš ništa ne znam. Mislim da je to najbolji put za knjigu. I ne volim kada mi neko nameće knjige. Uvijek kažem: stići će ta knjiga u moje ruke baš kada treba. Moje knjige su stigle do ovih umjetnica ne znam kako i one su napravile performans u kome je meni naročito interesantan bio vizualni dio. Slikarka je radila na dugom papiru koji se vertikalno odmotavao. Radila je kistom. Nekog japanskog minimalizma je bilo u ovom performansu što se meni jako dopalo. Ipak, moram vam priznati, osjećam izvjesnu nelagodu na takvim događajima. Ja sam potpuno odustala od javnosti. Evo sam se sjetila onog Borgesovog pisma javnosti kada je poručio da želi biti "nevidljivi čovjek". Ja živim u malom gradu, ovdje nema "veličina"; "slavnih ljudi", ali mi je želja za nevidljivošću veoma bliska.

Vaš roman *U znaku Ruže* bavi se životom i ubistvom Rose Luxemburg. Šta Vas je podstaklo da se posvetite ovoj temi?

Ovo je zagonetka i za mene samu. Ja sam u opkoljenom Sarajevu među nekim svojim starim papirima nabasala na podatak da je leš R. Luxemburg 1919. godine bačen u berlinski kanal i da ga je odatle neko izvukao za nagradu od tri njemačke marke. Počelo me opsjedati pitanje: ko? Ko je bio taj anonimni neko? Osjećala sam neobjašnjivu potrebu da anonimnoj osobi dam ime i lice, da osobu iz istorijske fusnote prebacim u tekst. U opkoljenom Sarajevu mene je, ja vam zaista ne znam objasniti zašto, opsjedalo nešto što se desilo 1919. godine.

Interesantno je kako sam dolazila do nekih podataka, nekih ilustracija, slika. Rukovodila sam se intuicijom, nenadanim detaljima, sitnicama. Volim onaj Frostov stih "If design govern in a thing so small." Postepeno sam otkrivala način da detalje i slike spojim u priču. I da sebi odgovorim na pitanje: ko bi taj čovjek trebao biti. Nisam zauzela poziciju sveznajućeg pisca. Nisam mistificirala. Naprotiv, sve vrijeme sam naglašavala da je u pitanju igra. Naravno, igra u plemenitom smislu riječi.

Imate li preferenciju za određenu književnu vrstu?

Volim kratku priču. Volim je i kao čitalac i kao pisac. Ne vjerujem u ogromne romane osim ako ih nije napisao Tomas Man, Tolstoj ili neko iz epohe velikih romana. Danas su moja mjera za roman Baricco i Coetzee. Možda griješim ali ja za velike savremene romane nemam vremena. Naročito zato što povremeno poželim da ponovo pročitam *Čarobni brijeg* Tomasa Mana. Za to treba odvojiti vrijeme.

Volim čitati dnevnik i pisma. Ali ne bilo kakva pisma i ne bilo kakve dnevnik. Primijetila sam da se danas pisma pišu tako da dva čovjeka kažu: hajdemo se dopisivati pa ćemo to poslije objaviti. Pretrest ćemo sve bitne aktuelne teme, pretrest ćemo ih da to bude dopadljivo pa ćemo to objaviti. Čak se i dnevnik pišu tako. Kad čitate Kafkine dnevnik i pisma ili Floberova pisma, bude vam jasno. To je vrhunska literature.

Desi se da jako zavolim nekog pisca kratke priče. Onda on objavi veliki roman. Pokušam to čitati pa odustanem. Dakle, kratka priča je moj favorit.

Esej “Blažen neka je dan” bilježi sjećanja na opsadu Sarajeva. U prevodu za *Eurozine*, esej je predstavljen kao implicitna kritika politizacije opsade.

Provela sam u Sarajevu sve dane i noći opsade. Knjiga *Smrt u Muzeju moderne umjetnosti* koja je u tim danima nastala, ne imenuje Sarajevo. U njoj se pominje “opkoljeni grad”. Ja to nisam uradila s nekom jasnom namjerom, to nije dio nekog plana. Skoro sam bila nesvjesna toga ali danas sa vremenske distance i nakon mnogo tekstova koji su objavljeni o sarajevskoj opsadi, meni je drago da sam učinila tako. Sarajevo je bila riječ koja je jedno vrijeme garantovala uspjeh knjige ili teksta. Kad kažem uspjeh mislim na prodaju, tržište. A kada pišete samo s tom namjerom, vi niste u literature nego u trgovini. Vi podležete zakonima mode i tržišta.

Ima kod Sempruna koji je preživio koncentracioni logor jedna divna scena gdje on pažljivo sluša osobu koja je bila s njim u logoru, a koja ga nakon mnogih godina ne poznaje ili se pretvara da ga ne poznaje. Semprun sluša pa razočarano kaže: Kako si to samo loše ispričao. Jako loše.

Često mi se desi da sam u prilici da mi ova Semprunova scena naumpadne. Ali, odmahnem rukom. Loše priče? Ništa ih ne može spasiti pa ni to što pominju Sarajevo.

Smatrate li da pisac efikasnije izražava svoj diskurzivni autoritet i kritiku putem fikcijskog stvaralaštva?

Jedino u šta sam sigurna i što vam sa sigurnošću mogu odgovoriti jeste: Pisac ne smije da laže. Nije laž kad napišete da ste vidjeli Marsovcе. To, eventualno, može biti ludilo, čaknutost. Od toga se može napraviti literatura. Od laži ne može. Laž je kada pišete a pri tome sve vrijeme imate na umu efekat dopadljivosti, prodaju...kada flertujete sa čitaocem...kada zauzimate pozu koja je trenutačno profitabilna. Jedna od mogućih poza je poza autoriteta i kritičara.

Ja pisanje pokušavam objasniti kao kad objašnjavate da neki metal, neka žica jeste ili nije dobar provodnik elektriciteta. Ima pisaca koji su dobri provodnici za nešto, neke teme, neke slike, neke sadržaje, a za druge su manje ili sasvim nepropusni. Ne možete nasilno pokušavati propuštati kroz sebe neke sadržaje. I ne možete na silu birati formu. Fikcija? Ako je ona proradila u vašoj stvaralačkoj laboratoriji, nemate se zašto dvoumiti. Sjednite pa pišite. Loše je ako vi sjednete pa kažete sebi...e sad ću izmisliti priču koja će biti kritika ovoga i onoga. Ako već želi da kritikuje pisac za to ima jednostavniji način. Može da iskoristi svoje građansko pravo i da direktno kaže šta misli.

Pisac je uvijek ili bi makar trebao biti pojedinac. Onoga trenutka kad zauzme poziciju kolektiviteta, kad hoće biti glas nacije ili nekog drugog kolektiviteta, zapada u kič i osiromašeno, skućeno polje značenja i metafora.

Ima li književnost ulogu u poslijeratnoj rehabilitaciji Bosne i Hercegovine?

Uloga književnosti je da bude književnost.

Uostalom, medijska javnost je u Bosni više fokusirana na glumce, režisere, svijet spektakla. Nedavno su o sarajevskom atentatu i stogodišnjici rata više govorili glumci nego istoričari. Interesantno je recimo da je nedavno u Sarajevu povodom 100 godišnjice sarajevskog atentata boravio francuski filozof Levy. Napisao je tekst koji je ovdje scenski upriličen. Bio je veoma u fokusu. Veoma sniman. Sniman je sa političarima, sa glumcima režiserima. Interesantno je da se nije sreo ni sa jednim piscem. Nije posjetio Društvo pisaca ili bosanski PEN.

Ove zime je bila i tridesetogodišnjica Zimskih olimpijskih igara, a slijedeće će

biti tačno dvadeset godina od potpisivanja Dejtonskog sporazuma.

Da, ovdje već imate sindrom jubileja. Mimo jubileja ovdje se živi siva stvarnost. Potroše se silne emocije i sredstva na jubileje a poslije toga svakodnevica jedva funkcioniра.

Ova godina je takođe označena građanskim protestima protiv vlade u februaru kao i katastrofalnim poplavama u maju. Neki komentatori su izrazili optimizam i pisali da su protesti i poplave zblížili narod i izbrisali etničku podijeljenost.

O solidarnosti u vrijeme nepogoda neprevaziđeno je pisao Ivo Andrić u romanu *Na Drini ćuprija*. Tamo je sve rečeno. Ja tome ne bih imala šta dodati. Nepogode jednokratno zblížavaju. Poslije toga nastupa svakodnevica. A građanski protesti su već *lanjski snijeg*. Ne može građanskog protesta biti tamo gdje je još uvijek najvažnija pripadnost naciji.

Kako Vi vidite trenutnu situaciju u Bosni i Hercegovini?

Ja vam mogu govoriti o onome što vidim kroz svoj prozor, što vidim u svojoj ulici, u gradu, što vidim dok putujem kroz Bosnu. Naravno, nešto vidim i na TV ekranu, u novinama. Nikada ne žurim sa zaključcima. Ali, ono što znam, što je evidentno, što mogu reći jeste da Bosnom i Hercegovinom vladaju izuzetno loši ljudi. Zapravo: grupe. Faktor grupnog povezivanja je najčešće nacionalni, ali iza toga se kriju sebični lični interesi.

Pomenuli ste godišnjice i, evo, u međuvremenu se obilježila i godišnjica onoga što se imenuje planetrano prepoznatljivom riječju Srebrenica. Nadam se da se ne treba objašnjavati. Strašno je to što zločinci još uvijek nisu kažnjeni. Ali je već primjetljiv i običaj da se Srebrenica pominje i tretira tek u svrhu lične promocije. Političari me u tom smislu ne zanimaju. Ali, strašno je kada to rade umjetnici i intelektualci. A rade! I ovdašnji i oni koji nam dolaze iz “velikog svijeta.”

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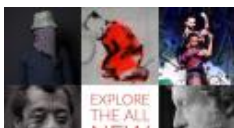


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