

## Téa Obreht, *The Tiger's Wife* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011)

War and its aftermath can create many issues for the survivors, not least among them new borders and the re-allocation of public spaces and familiar icons.

The war had altered everything. Once separate, the pieces that made up our old country no longer carried the same characteristics that had formerly represented their respective parts of the whole. ... Landmarks, writers, scientists, histories – had to be doled out according to their new owners. That Nobel Prize-winner was no longer ours, but theirs; we named our airport after our crazy inventor, who was no longer a communal figure. (159)

War stretches resources to the limit and services like medical treatment and education suffer as a result. The location and defusing of leftover 'live' ammunition can inflict further suffering. Then there's the gruesome task of identifying the remains of the dead from the piles of body parts 'picked out of ditches, trees, the rubble of buildings where they had been blown by the force of the bombs ... you could barely distinguish what they were, much less ... assign them ... to persons of loved ones' (279); a particularly important matter for families who want to honour dead loved ones. At such times ceremony and ritual, superstitions and folk tales comfort those who have survived as much as memories, and help them to cope with change.

In *The Tiger's Wife*, 25-year-old Serbian born Téa Obreht invents places and people in an unnamed country, and a young Balkan doctor, Natalia Stefanovic, to write a novel about the aftermath of the wars of the twentieth century. Moving between contemporary prose and the language of folk tales, she generates a matryoshka-style narrative of intersecting stories that requires the reader's full concentration to keep all the threads together. For instance, the extremely lengthy though poignant tale of Luka the butcher could almost stand on its own. By the time I'd read it, I had to re-read earlier sections in order to get back on track with the narrative. However, it is through stories such as this that conflicts are addressed: Christian and Muslim, Turk and Ottoman, science and superstition.

Whilst the Balkans and its various peoples create the novel's landscape, it is Natalia's grandfather, her memories of him and his stories that bring it to life. A doctor, and a famous one, he is a most interesting character. He enjoys ritual yet is pragmatic, is generally a realist yet doesn't deny supernatural events, and he has never lost his fascination for *The Jungle Book* and the majesty of the tiger, Sheer Khan: 'In my grandfather's life, the rituals that followed the war were rituals of renegotiation. All his life, he had been part of the whole – not just part of it, but made up of it' (159); and 'Everything necessary to understand my grandfather lies between two stories; the story of the tiger's wife, and the story of the deathless man' (30).

Of the two stories, the one about the deathless man is the one he did tell his granddaughter and it is a complex tale drawn from Slavic and German mythology where a man seeks to cheat death, in this case successfully.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PBS Newshour, Conversation: Tea Obreht author of *The Tiger's Wife*, 1 April 2011.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9vupUf1FDI>

In the modern passages of the novel, Natalia is travelling on a goodwill mission with her childhood friend Zora to inoculate children living in an orphanage across the new border; children orphaned by actions conducted by soldiers from her side of the border. As Natalia and Zora wait for clearance before continuing on their journey the threat of danger lurks even as they become frustrated with the customs process. It is during this hiatus in their journey that Natalia learns of her beloved grandfather's death, discovering that he has told her grandmother that he was travelling to help Natalia, while actually heading to Zdrevkov, a place not on any map and where he has died in a makeshift clinic. The clinic hasn't returned his belongings with his body and Natalia's grandmother is upset. She needs them for the proper observation of the ritual '40 days of the soul' (6). Natalia undertakes to seek answers to her grandfather's actions and to retrieve his belongings. As Natalia tries to come to terms with the loss of her grandfather, she discovers the stories he hasn't told her. The stories are a way of keeping him alive for Natalia as she mourns.

Natalia's earliest memory is of accompanying her grandfather on their ritual visit to the zoo housed in a fortress still intact from the Ottoman era. They bring food to feed the animals on their way to the tigers. It is for the tigers her grandfather comes. As they watch them he sits with an open copy of *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling on his knees and recites passages to her: 'I once knew a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself. I believe he is offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself – and will, for years and years' (2). Natalia has always believed that she was that young girl. However, much later, when she visits Galina, where her grandfather was born and where he spent his childhood, she discovers the story of the tiger's wife, a story her grandfather hadn't told her. She learns how her grandfather acquired the copy of *The Jungle Book* that he always carried and that he wagered with the deathless man. Villagers relate stories about the butcher, the apothecary, Darius the Bear and the blacksmith, stories that include her grandfather as a child. Woven through all the stories is that of the deaf-mute woman who befriended a tiger that had escaped when the zoo was bombed. Village superstition christened her 'the tiger's wife'. Natalia begins to understand the events that had such an impact on her grandfather's character.

There are moments of black comedy, such as when M. Dobravka the very small, very determined teacher arrives unusually late for class because on the way to the school she has taken a huge risk to acquire a pair of lungs 'pink, wet, soft as satin' (37) so that her students could actually see how lungs worked. Or when Natalia, during her medical training, is working part-time at a laboratory and is 'asked to help ... prepare brain samples for a research study from 'a bagful of baby mice' (154-5), and Ironglove who tells an accident victim, 'Don't worry sir – it's a lot easier to watch the second finger come off if you're biting down on the first' (12).

In Obreht's background stories are important. Her own, recently deceased, grandfather told her stories and his character has crept into that of the grandfather in her novel. Her homeland, the former Yugoslavia, was divided into seven separate countries following the most recent Balkans war, and although she hasn't experienced that war first-hand she has managed to convey its effect. She is the youngest author to win the Orange prize for Fiction, awarded in 2011, and is among the *New Yorker's* Top 20 Writers under 40 List.

## Kay Hart

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