



Josip Novakovich

Infidelities
ISBN13: 9780060583996

An Interview With Josip Novakovich

In a previous short story, "Sheepskin," a man believes he recognizes a soldier who tortured him. Similarly, the narrator of "Spleen" convinces herself that a new lover is the same man who tried to rape her many years ago. The stories conclude differently, but does that notion of false recognition carry a certain resonance for you in some way? Do these stories interconnect, thematically or otherwise, with your previous work?

Yes, I wanted to make a whole series of stories of recognitions and false recognitions. When I travel to the towns of my childhood, sometimes I recognize people from way before, sometimes I don't, and I try to guess what kinds of lives they have led. It's easier to recognize people's appearances than their souls and their actions. I think many of us jump to conclusions about people, and especially in the context of a war, that can be quite dangerous — many relatively innocent people can be blamed, and

on the other hand, many who aren't innocent, can pass safely. The question of what did everybody do in the war hovers over the region, and as people reintegrate into their old towns, or into new multi-ethnic communities, there are moments of suspicion. It's a complex way of encountering people, perfect for paranoia, and for storytelling. Storytelling, one kind of it, is wish fulfillment, and another, a fear fulfillment, a paranoid way of thinking expressed coherently — a simulation of imaginative aspects of madness. When I was a kid, I was fascinated by how intricate the stories of a couple of paranoid schizophrenics I knew could become, and I sought to replicate a bit of that way of thinking, to stimulate my imagination and to make stories close to the core of desire and fear. Fear is merely a desire negatively formed — a wish for something not to happen, rather than for something to happen, but at the core of both ways of thinking is a desire, a motive force. In my stories, people move strangely, with twisted desires.

Infidelities depicts life in conditions that are so tragic and surreal. How do people find the strength to carry on? Especially for the younger people who see no hope, or future. Do you believe it's possible to resolve the situation? Does optimism even have a place?

I believe in the negative dialectics, from my early communist upbringing. The wars and totalitarianism preceding them and succeeding them could be describe in a sunny manner only with cynicism. To express direct despair, to reach a point where things can't become worse, is a good way to reach a point of hope. Things can now only become better, and there's a rebirth of hope, optimism, and so on. The Balkans have gone through the purging of the past, guilt, fear, and I find a lot of cheer there now. The new generations, when I mention the war to them, look at me the way I looked at people who talked about the Second World War: this man must be old. We are past all this. And even the older people frequently don't look back any more. That's the strange thing about the Balkans — the adaptability of memory. People forget when it's time to move on, and when they get stuck in a crisis, suddenly they remember everything, collectively. So the countries go through oscillations — war, peace, love, jealousy, war, peace, love, jealousy. It's a different rhythm of ethnic strife and multiculturalism from the Irish-English, or Palestinian-Israeli, which seem to be a nearly constant strife. And I'd say the Balkans oscillate through different moods — fatalism, energy and optimism, and then more fatalism. From the outside, the fatalism is more impressive, and I suppose I deal with it more than with optimism. Storytelling is like western medicine—it concentrated on the disease rather than on health. Things that work don't need to be messed with, and things that don't, do. Well, sometimes.

How, or why, did you decide to start writing stories?

Everybody around me used to tell stories. My father was against TV, and his understanding of an evening of entertainment, when there was time for that, was to sit around the table and talk, and our visitors talked, and a lot of stuff that was said was boring, but I listened from the background, and livened up whenever there was an anecdote, a story. In social circles during my youth, many people told jokes, long jokes, such as hardly anybody has the patience these days to listen to, veritable stories with variations. Anyway, while I thought I wasn't particularly good at that kind of communication, being somewhat reticent by nature, I developed into a storyteller myself. I visited an English pub last spring, eager to hear the famous English wit and storytelling, and then, later, as the evening went on, I was the one telling anecdotes, and people were laughing, and I thought, this is not what was supposed to happen: I came to listen, and here they are listening. I used to be a good listener but unfortunately I have degenerated into a storyteller. Actually, I don't think I am unique in evolving into a storyteller. The art of listening and of reading, I am afraid, is dying out. Soon we will have more fiction writers than fiction readers. That has happened to poetry, and in fiction most of us felt safe from that, but we've quit listening and we read less than we used to. With our ADD culture, it's easier to tell stories, or to write them, than to read them. Of course, this is a woeful generalization, but there is something to it.

How did you choose the title for this collection? Do you start with a title, or let the stories lead you to one?

The stories suggested a title and once the title emerged in the editing process, it helped my editor, Terry Karten, and me, to organize the stories into a book. My book before this one, April Fool's Day, was once entitled Poppy Slopes, but that title didn't indicate the themes of the novel. For this book, I looked for a way of expressing the theme. There are two ways to entitle books: poetically, with startling images and word combinations, or thematically, indicating outright what the book is about. Ideally, one can combine both. In this instance, I may have strayed and overdone the thematic aspect, just as in some previous books I overdid the poetic approach. (Apricots from Chernobyl, for example, my collection of essays mostly about the war in Croatia, well — the title was misleading, and I made it hard for readers who wanted to read about the Croatian war to find it.) Sure, that title is poetic, but it's mostly useless, and for the current book, the title is informative and odd enough.

Who are the authors that you've found most influential to your own work? Would you mind telling us what you're currently reading?

Now that I have talked about the decline of the art of reading, I have disqualified myself as a reader. I used to be a better reader than now. I was deliberately and sometimes not deliberately influenced by Gogol and Dostoyevski, Kafka and Beckett. I wanted to be influenced by Dickens and his fabulously playful way of gracefully twisting sentences but I am incapable of such grace — haven't been blessed to be a native speaker of English, to begin with, or to live in a country and an age where language is an art form. I am re-reading Svejek by Jaroslav Hasek. I read it as a kid but now it sounds funnier. As I am writing an absurdist novel about World War One myself, I am reading the novels pertaining to that period. Generally, I like authors' worst novels. For example, Tolstoy's Resurrections is supposed to be perhaps his weakest novel but I certainly prefer it to Anna Karenina; and Three Soldiers by Dos Passos is supposed to be worse than most of his others, but I am enjoying it tremendously. (I didn't plan to parallel Oprah's reading path — but somehow I did.) I used to read much more current writing but I am back to the classics. On the other hand, as I don't trust the critics, I prefer to read the unglorified works of the best writers. I plan to re-read The Jungle by Louis Adamic, an excellent Slovenian writer who deserves resurrection.