



Infidelities

By Josip Novakovich
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Introduction

"He envied the Hungarians -- all over the place there were loud and bright ads for American and German companies, the roads were freshly asphalted; women bravely wore extremely short miniskirts, despite the cold weather and feverish men's eyes. That could have been us, he thought, if we knew how to get along." Such pangs of deprivation, the bittersweet desire for reality as it used to be, back when it was mundane, suffuse *Infidelities*, as soldiers, mothers, schoolboys and the elderly navigate life in the surreal, war-torn place once known as Yugoslavia.

A Buddhist soldier finds himself forced to choose between his comrades and the enemy in "Hail." A Serbian shopkeeper, living in a Croat region, feels reassured upon realizing that his was not the only looted storefront in "Neighbors." A teacher decides to sacrifice herself to protect her son in "Ribs," yet finds her terror strangely mixed with passion. And a Croatian writer in New York reads Dos Passos and

flirts with women on the subway in "59th Parallel," disdaining the reality he so admired as fiction. In ten crystalline stories, **Josip Novakovich** examines the gruesome absurdities of war, the humor needed to survive, and the moral quandaries faced by those trapped between poverty, bigotry, and gunfire.

Questions for Discussion

1. In "Spleen," a Bosnian émigré frequents a restaurant named after a Croatian city because, "just knowing it's there comforts me; it's a bit of homeland." But a Russian émigré in "59th Parallel" dismisses popular Russian hangouts as, "lost in time ... with all the misfits who want to feel they are still in Russia." How do these two opposing views encapsulate the fears and desires of an immigrant?
2. The Bosnian Serbs in "Neighbors" and "The Bridge Under the Danube" dismiss the idea of moving to Serbia because they would be "shunned as peasants," "insulted in a bakery for using the Croatian word kruh for bread (rather than Serbian hleb)," and therefore choose to stay in Croatia because, "the way they grew up speaking, that way they would die." Does the fact that these Serbs do not feel welcome in Serbia underscore the absurdities of this ethnic conflict? Are the criteria for ethnicity and nationalism perhaps not as fixed and tangible as they might have seemed? Why do Serbian nationalists attack Milka and Drago, who are also Serbs, in "The Bridge Under the Danube"? How does this incident further undermine the ostensible reasons for nationalistic divisions, and highlight the driving force behind the conflict?
3. In "Hail," Haris observes, "two ravens played a tug of war with a stretch of long intestines. The intestines glowed crimson with the sun shining through them. But he was the only one noticing." How is this scene a metaphor for the war? In what way does it foreshadow the conclusion of the story? Could the title be interpreted as a pun?
4. In "A Purple Story," everything around him "burst into a purple splash" when Ranko had a heart attack. At the hospital, waiting for a heart transplant, what is the grotesque choice Ranko is asked to contemplate? How does this battle with "the Satan of Survival" affect Ranko? Given subsequent events, what can we assume about the General's character? Do you think it was fate that dispatched the grasping General, or do Ranko's conspiracies have a ring of truth? As the story ends, with Ranko eager to "go to the mountains and look for mushrooms," embracing his wife, can we assume that Ranko has made a choice after all?
5. Consider the religious imagery present throughout *Infidelities*: In "Hail," tree stumps stick out, "like severed arms, with chopped hands gone, as though the trees had stolen -- what, air? -- and were then mutilated according to the Koran laws." In "Neighbors," the wind carries a picture of the Virgin, a "washed up piece of paper with the image of the narrow mouth," past Marko as he stands on a mine. Coupled with a scene in "The Bridge Under the Danube" of a besieged church whose minister turns to prayer only when the congregation failed to produce an adequate weapon, do these religions appear to be of any solace to those fighting, or suffering, for their beliefs? Considering the "grey-white destroying angel" Marko stepped on, could a new cosmology be hypothesized, in "The Bridge," for "the love of God, which came through the old woman"?
6. As narrator dreams of her lover in "Spleen," it becomes a nightmare in which, "blood kept coming out of him, and furniture floated, and my bed turned into a sinking boat." As Marko sleeps in "Neighbors," "his dreams ambushed him in a kaleidoscope of blood and jam." And Mira Ivicic sees her dead husband in hallucinatory dreams in "Ribs," in which, "like a doubting Thomas" once did to the risen Christ, she searches for the holes that prove it's really him. How do these dreams reflect the anxieties of each dreamer? Do they present fears that are too unbearable to think about consciously?
7. In "Neighbors," Branko shares a joke that begins, "a Serb, a Croat and a Bosnian are the only survivors of a shipwreck." In "Hail," Hasan's joke ends with the punch line, "but not everybody has hands." What other examples of such gallows humor appear in *Infidelities*? Why do you think the characters are so fond of grim jokes? Consider the irony of the Mothers Against War march, in "Ribs," that disintegrates into a slugfest between Serbian and Croatian mothers. How does this episode highlight the incongruous absurdity and surreal brutality that's become commonplace for ordinary people? How does humor alleviate the reality that surrounds them?
8. In "Night Guest," the Italian narrator finds himself embroiled in the domestic disputes of his rural Ohioan neighbors. How would you characterize Marietta and Shelly? What is Shelly implying when she says, "here you are, a gentleman, European, and you have

to deal with us hicks"? How does the narrator misunderstand Marietta's use of the word "love"? How did the jealous cop misunderstand him? Can such frictions be attributed to differing cultural norms? The narrator is "ashamed of being a snob," but as his desire struggles with his fastidiousness, which wins?

9. Compare the male narrators of "Night Guest," "Tchaikovsky's Bust," and "59th Parallel" to each other. Do you think the woman each man desires reciprocates the emotion? Are the women vessels upon which fantasies are projected or seducers in their own right? How does each romantically fraught encounter resolve itself? Is it of any significance that each man is a foreigner to his current location? Since the title, "52nd Parallel" is clearly a nod towards 42nd Parallel by John Dos Passos, what are we to make of our narrator when he puts aside the Dos Passos novel, right when a hobo fears, "he will cough to death if he lies down," to shut a window, blocking the noises of a homeless man making an "awful, obnoxious racket," on the street?

10. How do Mirko and his friends embody the universal qualities of children -- mischief, mockery, and an innate sense of fairness - in "Snow Powder"? What incident sets in motion a dramatic shift away from that for Mirko? After Mirko's first meeting with the soldiers, "for the first time ever, he felt guilty that he was going to school." Has an inversion of normality, of moral decay, already begun? The soldiers are surprisingly considerate and paternal towards Mirko, yet given their subsequent actions, how capable are they of being parent substitutes? How thickly, or thinly, does adulthood sit upon them? How do you interpret the last sentence of this story -- "he had found the best job in the world for a boy"?

11. From the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to the present, Balkans faced regular intervals of war and political turmoil. As Marko walks back to his shop, in "Neighbors," he sees layered posters and slogans of campaigns past, each testifying to the betrayals of those pasted beneath. To Marko, "the unwashable history lurked and jeered." He finds it all "irrepressibly ridiculous" until he sees his store, vandalized and destroyed. Why do you think history keeps repeating itself in such a manner? Has Infidelities provided any insights?

12. Do the sexual encounters depicted in "Spleen" and "Ribs" prove the axiom that "hate and lust aren't antonyms"? The narrator of "Tchaikovsky's Bust" clearly imagines being unfaithful to his wife, but who, or what, for example, does Nedjeljko Cabrinovic betray in "The Stamp"? How do the themes of war and lust connect these short stories? What are the titular infidelities that thread this collection together?

Author Bio

Josip Novakovich is the winner of a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. His acclaimed first novel, **April Fool's Day**, was published in 2004. A resident of central Pennsylvania, he teaches at Penn State University.