

Croatian writer sees her place in a tragic mosaic

BY DONN FRY
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If you happen to attend Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulić's appearance at 7:30 tonight at the Elliott Bay Book Company, you will hear a woman admit responsibility for the carnage defiling her Balkan homeland.

Hers is a small role, to be sure — a microdot compared with the atrocities available for home viewing on TV news each evening. Yet it is a true role, one compounded of myriad tiny elements from everyday life: reading a Serbian newspaper in a train car filled with Croatian compatriots; uttering an insensitive remark to a friend who has become a refugee; realizing from your daughter's packed suitcase that the war has entered your own apartment.

Shared responsibility

The patchwork of violence that has settled over the former Yugoslavia is actually a mosaic of shared responsibility, says Drakulić in her new book, "The Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War" (Norton, \$19.95). And she never shrinks from acknowledging her personal place in the pattern — indeed, the "other side" is *her* side, the side of individual non-combatants throughout the region.

"We can't delegate our responsibility and say the government is re-

sponsible for this, the military is responsible for that," said Drakulić shortly after arriving in Seattle. At 43, her eyes wear the sad knowledge of her nation's tragedy, yet she has a quick smile and delivers her thoughts with fierce passion.

"What I think I can do as a writer is to write about the war, but also to write about *me* in it," she declared. "But even as a journalist, you have no right to look around and observe and judge others — you have to admit what *you* do."

"The Balkan Express," consequently, is a series of brief and compelling meditations — "stories," she calls them — on the inevitable effects of war on the individual psyche. It is about the distortion in values that emerges in a society immersed in conflict, even in a relatively safe haven such as the Croatian capital of Zagreb, a city of 1.2 million.

"(W)ar is not a single act, it is a state of facts and minds, a head-spinning spiral of events and a gradual process of realization," writes Drakulić. "(I)t seems that everyone has to learn this truth alone, step by step, from the events of his or her own life."

Calling attention to this fact has not endeared Drakulić to her fellow Croats. She is, she said, *persona non grata* in her homeland, though she



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Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulić: "What I think I can do as a writer is to write about the war, but also to write about me in it."

continues to live there. She is routinely reviled in Croatia's propagandistic press; her journalistic outlet is periodicals in the West, ranging from newspapers in Stockholm to American journals such as *The Nation* and *The New York Review of Books*.

"I am harassed to the point that not only would they not ask me to write an article or a book, but to the point where they won't even report that my books have been published elsewhere," she said.

With a weary contempt, Drakulić noted that not one of her colleagues in the Croatian media has stood up to defend her after the attacks began.

Instead, most writers bought into the extreme nationalism propounded by the government.

"What happened was, they didn't write about this bloody war, they didn't write about the people," she said. "Also, they didn't write about the difficult moral choices. They just didn't. They failed."

Ultra-nationalism released

Croatian journalism's failure, she said, is only understandable as a defensive response to the even greater failure of the writing community in neighboring Serbia. While Drakulić readily acknowledges that atrocity is

not limited to any one side in the Balkan conflict, she believes that most of the fighting has resulted from the ultra-nationalism methodically unleashed in the late 1980s by Serbian president Slobodan Milosević; Serbia's best writers, she said, assumed an active role in planning his campaign.

"This war didn't start with peasants fighting each other for many years," she said. "No, absolutely not."

It may not have started that way, but that's what it has become, pitting friends, neighbors, even relatives against one another, as she documents so movingly in "The Balkan Express." Most chilling is her encounter with Ivan, a baby-faced though battle-hardened 19-year-old.

Speaking with dispassionate matter-of-factness, Ivan recalls standing with a group of 50 Croatian irregulars and watching three of their colleagues beat to death a fourth young man — a Serb who formerly was a pal of his attackers. The young Serb, you see, had murdered the brother of one and the parents of the other two, who were brothers.

"Our guys got really mad like and jumped on him. They beat him like hell, it's hard to describe. They beat him and they cried, because he used to be their friend," said Ivan.

"They had been together since they were 16," he continued. "They beat him with everything, sticks, everything. . . . And I couldn't condemn them for what they did."

How could this happen? The reason, Drakulić said, is that the demise

of Communist repression in Yugoslavia left only two institutions unprepared for the challenges of democracy: the ethnic cultures and their various religions.

"(T)his society never had a proper chance to become a society not of oppressed peoples," she writes, "but of citizens, of self-aware individuals with developed democratic institutions within which to work out differences, conflicts and changes instead of war."

Lacking those institutions, nationalism — and by that Drakulić means an extreme form of cultural chauvinism — has gripped each segment of society. She sees only one solution, though it finds no receptive audience in the West.

"My very personal feeling is that nothing can be done without ground troops," said Drakulić, calling for a massive military infusion by the major European powers and the United States to neutralize all the warring Balkan factions. To do otherwise, she said, "is to inaugurate the principle of aggression" as a solution to the problems of borders and minorities in Europe.

"This is where the future of Europe is decided," she said. "If the rules of the game are not set by the Big Powers now, we are going to see a destabilized Europe, and America should see that it's in their interest not to have a destabilized Europe in the future."

"What are you going to do when the war moves to Russia, where they still have nuclear arms?"