

"S." tells a story of women held captive by the Serbs.

In a novel, some brutal truths about conflict in the Balkans

S.

A Novel About the Balkans
By Slavenka Drakulic
Viking, 201 pp. \$22.95

Reviewed by Rita Giordano

S., a teacher, is in her apartment the morning the soldiers come to town. She has not run yet and she does not run now because it is too late. In moments, S. will be led away by a young man who could have been one of her students. She will be herded onto a bus with others and taken to a prison camp.

Soon afterward, she and several other women will be selected. They will be sent to the "women's room" to await nightly rapes and beatings by their Serb captors, their former Bosnian countrymen. Their horror will compound as they hear rumors of executions. They will smell burning flesh, and their minds will race. Some will survive, or at least their bodies will.

One of them, S., will not meet her death in this place. But fate has something even more unthinkable in store.

The story of S. is not factual; it is fiction. Nonetheless it is very, very true. Devastatingly true. And S.: *A Novel About the Balkans* may very well be one of the strongest books about war you will ever read.

Initially, Croatian-born journalist Slavenka Drakulic set out to write a nonfiction account of the survivors of the prison camps in the Bosnian war. She interviewed victims and did research at the war-crime centers in Bosnia. Ultimately, she decided the best way for her to present the women's collective experience was through a fictional character, a woman she calls S. The result is this book.

No doubt empowered by her research, Drakulic has crafted a novel that allows her to get fully into the mind of a woman who has been

subjected to the unspeakable. Yet there are no traces of melodrama, cheap shots or political discourses. The writing is taut, precise and masterful. Drakulic brings the full horror of ethnic cleansing to life in a vivid, idiosyncratic way that will haunt the corners of your mind long after the book's final page.

But as tortured and harrowing as S.'s story is, this is also a work of great humanity.

The book begins in a hospital in Sweden with a woman who has just given birth to a child she intends to reject and put up for adoption. That woman is S., by then a refugee, and the child is the product of rape by her former captors. Which one, she could not begin to guess.

For months, the growing child felt like a tumor within her, a foreign object she just wanted out and gone. Now that being is a son whom she refuses to touch or acknowledge. Drakulic's prose does not apologize for S. It states what is in her mind. Even at this early stage, you know better than to hate this woman.

You get to know her quickly. When she is forced from her apartment on a spring day in 1992 by a young soldier with torn sneakers and just the beginnings of a mustache, her mind seems not able to process what is happening to her. It seems unreal. She even offers the soldier a cup of coffee.

And S. views herself as different from the other prisoners she is being lumped in with. The others are country people, peasants, and Muslim. She is educated and urban, from Sarajevo. And while her father, an engineer, is Muslim, her mother is a Serb who works for a state-owned company. Until the soldiers came, she thought that would protect her. She learns fast that nothing can.

In the camp, men and women are separated, the women imprisoned in a stifling warehouse. They ask each other what they know of rumors of murder and torture. At ran-

dom, usually at night, soldiers come and force women or girls to go with them, and the women are not seen again. They are brought to the "women's room," according to camp rumor. They all know what this means. So does S. when, finally, the soldiers come for her.

What follows — the initial rape and all that comes after for S. and her fellow prisoners — is hard to take. It is also superbly told. Raw fear and panic would be predictable. Instead, the unfolding of S.'s ordeal has an almost underwater quality, like a dream where everything is in slow motion. Imagine living normal life one day, and the next, people you might have nodded to on the street are holding you prisoner and subjecting you to the worst brutality imaginable. Drakulic's book gives the reader a sense of what that might be like in such a way that you can easily forget you are reading fiction.

In the richness of her details and insights, Drakulic is anything but predictable. The characters in her book suffer through horrible acts of violence, as of course did the real victims of the camps. Yet what S. dwells on even more than the physical pain is the effort to so profoundly humiliate the captives — the crude, mean and vicious attempts in so many ways to rob their humanity.

For that reason, S. begins to wear makeup. It angers some of the other women, but S. is not trying to curry favor with her brutalizers, nor is she losing her mind. To S., it is a kind of disguise and a way — at least in her own eyes — to take back a bit of control. If the men think she is in some way willing, she feels they lose the power to humiliate her.

During her imprisonment, S. is selected by the commander of the base, the Captain, as his. It spares her from random selection by the others, and he does not beat her, but this is no love story. When he calls for her, she sleeps on clean



Slavenka Drakulic, a Croatian-born journalist, had set out to write a nonfiction account of the women before turning to fiction.

sheets, eats decent food, affects normalcy. A lesser hand would try to wring more out of this, or else perhaps have S. find some way to perform heroics for her fellow prisoners through her arrangement with the Captain. But S. knows all she can do, all any of them can do in such a bestial situation, is maybe save herself.

In addition to the skillfully drawn S., Drakulic's other women ring unerringly true and make the story read like a series of blows to the heart. There is the woman whose every effort is to save her daughter. And there is the girl, a prisoner of the women's room, who is so relieved to see a soldier who was the friend of her brother. It wouldn't be fair to readers to tell what happens to these women, but their stories will churn emotions hard to put aside.

And then there is S. and the child she has borne. Better to read for yourself. Anything less and you'd be cheated. Drakulic has created a novel that is almost hypnotically compelling. Because of its intensity and unsettling subject matter, it may not be as widely read as it deserves. For those readers, what a loss.

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