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“Where are your clogs? You’ll catch a cold!”

## An interview with Josip Novakovich

« Où sont tes socques? Tu attraperas un rhume! »

## Un entretien avec Josip Novakovich

Interviewed by / Interrogé par Jason Blake

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**JB** In many of your essays you deal with writing about Croatia from abroad, even saying that it’s easier to write about the country you were born in than the United States to which you moved as a young man. In one essay, you write, “Moving away from Croatia made it easier for me to write about Croatia.” Can you say a few words on why this is so?

**JN** I think the primary reason is that from far away Croatia appeared more interesting than when I lived there. When I was there I felt stuck as a provincial, and everything important seemed to be going on abroad in big countries. Of course, my perspective changed once I got to the States.

**JB** You often write critically of the system in which you grew up. Have these stances softened in the many years since you’ve been away – or did you feel just as critical back when you were a child and a young man in your hometown of Daruvar?

**JN** Well, the communist socialism as practised in Yugoslavia had many drawbacks. For example, you couldn’t joke about Tito or you’d end up in jail. If we had the same system in the States, Bill Maher and John Oliver would be in prison for a long time, or maybe they would disappear. The country took itself too seriously, the propaganda was boring and obviously false. Our medical care was not all that great, dentistry was awful, and education was so-so, insisting on conformism. Sure, there were good sides to the system, but then the world maybe used to be a better place.

**JB** I adore the title of your 2012 collection *Shopping for a Better Country*, not least because it rejects nativism in favour of choice. When did you first begin to consider choosing a country and nationality rather than simply being born into one?

**JN** Well, many people went abroad to work. My older sister did, and she spoke better German than Croatian. Clearly, she could choose to remain in Germany. Many people



emigrated. It used to be difficult before the border restrictions were loosened, and they had the status of heroes. Around the age of 17, after my trip around Europe, I decided that the world was way too interesting to remain just in Croatia. American rock music seemed like a call from the beyond, Samuel's call, which I couldn't resist.

**JB** Of course, the key question for a writer is language rather than nationality. Somewhere you mention that, if you were younger, you "would perhaps look for a third language to write in," as a sort of spiritual exile. Could you say a few words about that?

**JN** The experience of understanding the world in a new language, paying attention to every word, its sound, its components, is a very creative one – you re-compose the world, re-assemble it, and that fresh vision is hard to maintain in a language that consists of habits and unconscious reflexes. When I could understand things in English, and say them, and play with words, I experienced what seemed to me an enlightenment. Of course, it didn't last, and I can't get it again. I was close to it when I learned German, but now with French, I am just not skilled in it enough to have great linguistic and revelatory moments.

**JB** You have taught in many places. Northrop Frye wrote that most of the time when he was in the United States, the students seemed the same as in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, however, differences emerge. Have you noticed something of the same in Montreal? If so, can you provide an example?

**JN** The students are very similar. But if there are differences, that probably has to do with the change in the era. Every ten years North America undergoes a shift, either to the right or the left, either toward sexual revolution and hedonism or repression and social responsibility. But yes, sometimes I suddenly feel I am in a foreign country, partly because I hear French, and partly because the economic opportunities here seem to be much worse than in the States, so people seem worried about each dollar.

**JB** Growing up in one place and then moving from place to place, country to country, has surely been an advantage to your outlook as a writer. Can you comment on ways in which this (to use an overused and vague term) cosmopolitanism has helped you?

**JN** Advantage and disadvantage. If I had stayed in my native language, I would have written more stories there, with more nuance. I am abroad, and I look at Croatia from afar, and write in broader strokes, seeing things as perhaps more surreal than I would if I were there. In some ways the distance encourages me to see things as strange and

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1) Here is the quotation from Frye's 1977 essay "Sharing the Continent": "Nine-tenths of the time the responses of my American students are identical with those of Canadian students, but the tenth time I know that I'm in a foreign country and have no idea what the next move is."



story-worthy. If I were there, some things would simply appear banal or painful and I wouldn't be able to play with them in stories.

**JB** Your book *Fiction Writers Workshop* (first published in 1995) is a classic and I use it often in my classes to teach how stories work. There you write, "And while there are no absolute rules, there are various game plans, and games have their rules. Although I offer lots of advice on how to set up point of view or chronology of events, or how to juggle telling." My question: in your experience in teaching writing, have you noticed generational changes? And is there perhaps a Canadian-American split in terms of how up-and-coming writers approach the writing game?

**JN** Things that used to be experimental, like metafiction and multi-genre references and tricks (such as linking the work to websites), are now mainstream. Young people have a fair dose of contempt for linear narrative. Unfortunately, the magic of technology, which makes many impossible things seem plausible, seems to have created a new generation of lovers of fantasy, sometimes cheesy fantasy. Many people have grown up on Harry Potter. Not so many on Huck Finn and Charles Dickens, let alone Maupassant and Dostoyevsky. People seem to write not to be in touch with reality but to have an escape, a mental trip. Perhaps the hallucinogenic era contributed to that.

**JB** While reading your story collection *Ex-Yu* (2015), I got the thrill of feeling like the stories were written for me. For example, this sentence: "For the evening meal Marta prepared zgan-ci, a hot corn cereal with fresh cow's milk." The subtle gloss after "zgan-ci" made me feel like it was an explanatory footnote for the less informed, for those that wouldn't spot the missing diacritic over the z. Similarly, I got a chuckle out of this proverbial wisdom: "You should never walk barefoot; where are your clogs? You'll catch a cold!" Though I don't live in Croatia, and didn't grow up in ex-Yugoslavia, I felt like an ideal reader. Is there in fact an ideal reader for your works?

**JN** Someone who grew up with me might not appreciate such domestic details but for me from far away, they are perhaps substance of nostalgia, wine and the wafer, to bring the spirit of the place back to me. I am not sure there's an ideal reader for me. After all, I don't have a broad audience. But then I think of writing not in terms of pop culture and pop stage but a speakeasy – jazz may be more interesting than U2 although not as catchy. I had the best audience at the maximum security prison in Cowensville, Quebec. Twelve inmates read my novel *April Fool's Day*, and amazed me by how much they remembered, what lines they underlined. . . They were all murderers. I won't say that murderers would make the ideal reading club for me, but these guys took war descriptions seriously and could transport themselves into them.



**JB** To what extent do you think of readers who might not “get” the references and some of the humour (such as the pathological Central European fear of cold feet)?

**JN** I worry sometimes. For example, drafts are supposed to cause colds so that even in the summer when it's hot people shut the windows on buses in Croatia. So in a few instances when I mentioned drafts, I elaborated, and that may slow down the tempo of the narrative but at the same time, it's a good moment to examine the old wives' medical tale. Maybe there's something to it after all. So being aware of not only Croatian readers but American and Spanish, let's say, I become more analytical of the customs and habits at home. Some references simply can't be translated, and I say, so be it.

**JB** In *Plum Brandy* (2003) you write that the texts are between essays and short stories. Do you feel that the focus on genre labels is outmoded?

**JN** The genre distinction is too rough. I don't think Europeans ever worried about it as much as the Americans do. For example, Peter Handke's novels are memoirs and travelogues, and occasionally there's something imagined in them. But nobody worries if he calls these texts novels. A lot of Krasznahorkai and Thomas Bernhard falls between fiction and nonfiction, and nobody seems to worry about it but in the States we have to declare the genre – almost as if we were crossing the border and having to show our nationality, our passport. Recently I was crossing the border to the US and the officer asked me while looking at my passport, What is your nationality? I said, Don't you see it? Shouldn't the American passport answer that question? At the same time, there's a lot of cross-genre writing, but then it's a new genre, cross-genre. New nationality, Irish-American, . . . America is a hyphenated country as everybody has to explain himself. In writing too we are driven to this self-consciousness in terms of genre. But these labels hinder more than they help.

**JB** To return to the readers and genres: do you envisage different types of readers for different genres?

**JN** Well, yes. People who want to read fiction want entertainment. If you choose nonfiction, you want to learn something primarily. Nonfiction readers seem to be a more serious bunch, not looking for thrills as much as understanding. But no matter what audience and genre I deal with, I always want to tell a story. It has to be interesting to me, and if it is, perhaps it will be interesting to a reader. And sometimes I choose to write a nonfictional kind of story in the sense – something happened and I want to retell it. Some stories are given to us by our experience, and if we retell them without transforming them imaginatively into what didn't happen, we are writing nonfiction and telling stories at the same time. In fiction, you tell often what didn't happen. That's why I have a hard time with the historical novel, which takes research



on let's say Lincoln or Stalin or Nikola Tesla as a pattern into which to put a few imagined descriptions and bits of dialogue, but the frame is lifted from history, and the obligation remains to write what happened rather than what didn't. People are even mad if something in historical fiction turns out to be made up – for example, Jerzy Kosiński was practically murdered by the literary establishment because *The Painted Bird* turned out to be pure fiction rather than autobiographical fiction. Well, he should have been congratulated on making up events within the historical and memoiristic context.

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**JOSIP NOVAKOVICH** / is a professor within the Department of English at Concordia University in Montreal. He has published several short story collections, a novel, numerous essay collections, and two textbooks on writing. His most recent book is the story collection *Honey in the Carcase* (2019), which was published by Dzanc Books a few weeks after this interview was conducted.

