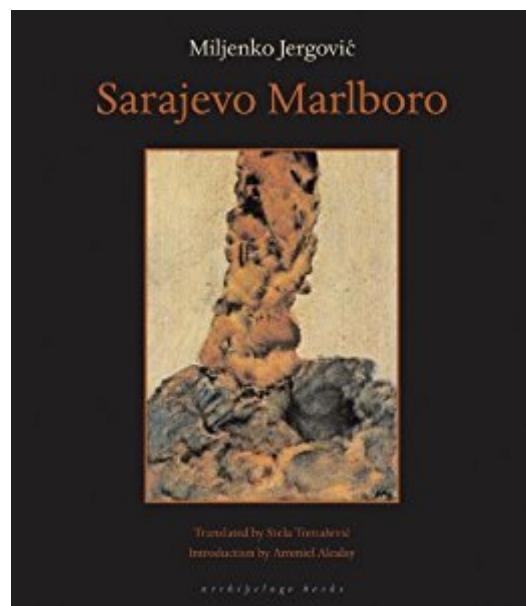


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Sarajevo Marlboro



Synopsis

Miljenko Jergovic's remarkable debut collection of stories, Sarajevo Marlboro "winner of the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize" earned him wide acclaim throughout Europe. Croatian by birth, Jergovic spent his childhood in Sarajevo and chose to remain there throughout most of the war. A dazzling storyteller, he brings a profoundly human, razor-sharp understanding of the fate of the city's young Muslims, Croats, and Serbs with a subterranean humor and profoundly personal vision. Their offbeat lives and daily dramas in the foreground, the killing zone in the background.

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Customer Reviews

This debut collection of stories from journalist Jergovic was first published a decade ago in his native Croatia (he has since written nine more books). Then in his mid-20s, he lived in besieged Sarajevo for the bulk of the war, reporting and chronicling the human suffering he witnessed. These twenty-nine stories are drawn from his experiences, and yet are not the standard-issue thinly veiled reportage that so much wartime fiction ends up as. Rather, these are brief character studies and snapshots into daily life, lives where the war has changed everything, and yet must continue. Each is only a few pages, moving quickly to the point, and then ending. Fatalism runs heavily throughout

the book, as do the obvious themes of displacement, confusion, anxiety, and occasional absurdity. Although each is distinct and precise, these brief snapshots do tend to blur together into a larger picture when read as an ensemble. The collection is probably best approached as something to dip into once a week, and then contemplate. Otherwise, the stories of suffering and surviving tend to cancel each other out and their impact is greatly diminished. The strident introduction by Ammiel Alcalay rather oddly asserts that translated works such as this can provide only an out of context and fragmentary taste of a culture and place, and that to really "get" a book like this, you need to possess all kinds of background context such as the social and political history of Yugoslavia as well as an understanding of the relationship between performance spaces, art galleries, visual artist, musicians, and filmmakers, and so forth. It's a bizarre way to introduce a book by stating that the reader has no hope of empathy.

Behind the storyteller in this fine collection of short stories is a journalist intent on portraying a time and place (Sarajevo during the 1990s Balkan War) and the people living there, dying, or fleeing. Instead of the drama that journalistic war coverage tends to bring to the subject, Jergovic speaks from another perspective. He has the sensibility of one for whom mortars, refugees, death and injury, living in a cellar, lack of running water and electricity, and loss of everything of value have become routine. It is an achievement to retain a kind of sanity that allows one to carry on yet another day in hell as hope of rescue fades. Under the calm, resigned, matter-of-fact surface of these stories there is a deep sorrow and rage. Also an appreciation for all that is temporal and fleeting though taken for granted until it disappears. A story devoted to the burning of libraries is an occasion for encouraging the reader to cherish books (including the one the reader is holding as he/she reads this) for they are dust. Another story, devoted to the loss of faith, tells of a woman who clings to the belief that her husband killed in action was not in love with another woman. Faith is more important than love, the author argues. It is an untruth we tell ourselves to protect us from the lies of others. Other stories depict the emotional disconnect that occurs for those who have lost loved ones or have witnessed horrible atrocities. A man whose family has been slaughtered is taken for psychological testing to a hospital in Prague, where he likens himself to one being avenged for the same murders - and is promptly declared insane.

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