

Canzone di guerra

Canzone di guerra: nove davorije

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The novel “Canzone di guerra: nove davorije” (“Canzone di guerra”: the new war songs”, published in 1998 by the Croatian writer Daša Drndić (1946–2018), is part of an extensive body of post-Yugoslav anti-war literature written after 1990. The novel tells the story of Yugoslav emigrants in Canada and focuses on the exile experience of the middle-aged woman, writer and single mother Tea Radan. It deals with a number of social and cultural phenomena that were intensified by the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the migration processes that followed. The revaluation of social and cultural values and norms in contemporary post-Yugoslav societies, the rise of nationalism and violence, language reforms, immigration policies and procedures, class stratification, economic and cultural stigmatization of Yugoslav emigrants, the historical relations between the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and the legacy of the Second World War in the former Yugoslav countries are some of the most important issues treated by the skillful literary analysis for which Daša Drndić became known in the years and works following the novel's publication.

“Canzone di guerra” follows the narrator Tea Radan and her daughter Sara as they move from the Serbian capital Belgrade to the Croatian coastal town of Rijeka, and then from Rijeka to Toronto in Canada, in the wake of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. The novel traces the profound impact of the war on everyday life and the general political and cultural climate in the former Yugoslav countries, which led to a wave of migration to Western Europe and overseas.

After moving from Belgrade to Rijeka in the mid-1990s, Tea and Sara eventually move to Toronto, Canada, where Sara continues her schooling while Tea takes on various short-term jobs. In between working and dealing with administrative procedures, Tea frequently visits Roberts Library, where she begins researching the history of the NDH (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, Independent State of Croatia) and Second World War. The historical research of her country becomes more and more interwoven with an insight into Tea's family history, the layers of which are revealed through various documents kept in the family between the two wars. The main narrative is enriched with the letters her grandfather wrote to Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito in the 1950s and with excerpts from her mother's diaries, which she wrote in Zagreb in the first half of the 1940s, when she collaborated with the partisans and was imprisoned and interrogated by the Ustasha police. The story of the family between two wars half a century apart brings out several analogies and contrasts: the mosaic of the post-war everyday life in the 1950s collides with the narrator's pre-war life in Belgrade and the current state of affairs in the post-Yugoslav countries. Although discontinuous, the family story between the history of two wars reveals how the violence of war, the uniformity of nation, language and ideology, and the deepening of class divisions resurface in each generation. As can be seen from one of the footnotes, the title “Canzone di guerra” recalls the critical assessment of linguistic uniformity and normativity by one of the most important Croatian and Yugoslav writers, Miroslav Krleža. In addition to the juxtaposition of fictional narrative and factual

documents with which the novel continuously plays, the text contains a whole mix of genres, which are included in the footnotes: quotes from George Orwell's and Miroslav Krleža's work, which strongly recall a European and Yugoslav tradition of engaged literary writing and point to an intertextual motivation of the novel's narrative strategies, excerpts from historiographical literature, newspaper articles and various manuals on the historically recurring question of "how to survive", such as Yugoslav household manuals from the 1950s and the humanitarian manuals from the 1990s.

Although the novel is written in the first person, the narrator's voice often overlaps with other voices, such as the testimonies of other Yugoslav emigrants in Canada and those of Holocaust survivors. With its rather heterogeneous and complex structure, "Canzone di guerra" protests against the historical injustices it brings to light. The reconstruction of a linear story of mother and daughter, who move from one part of the former country to another, and from there overseas and back, is not a task that this novel imposes on the reader. Rather, "Canzone di guerra" offers the reader the possibility of a disjointed reading of fragments from different spaces and times and from a heterogeneous mixture of textual sources. This allows for both highly symbolic passages with animalistic motifs that play with the literary tradition of the political novel, as well as unexpected analogies in which beautiful stories of resistance and love between mothers, daughters and sisters suddenly appear in the background of the great historical scenes.

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CENSORSHIP STATUS: