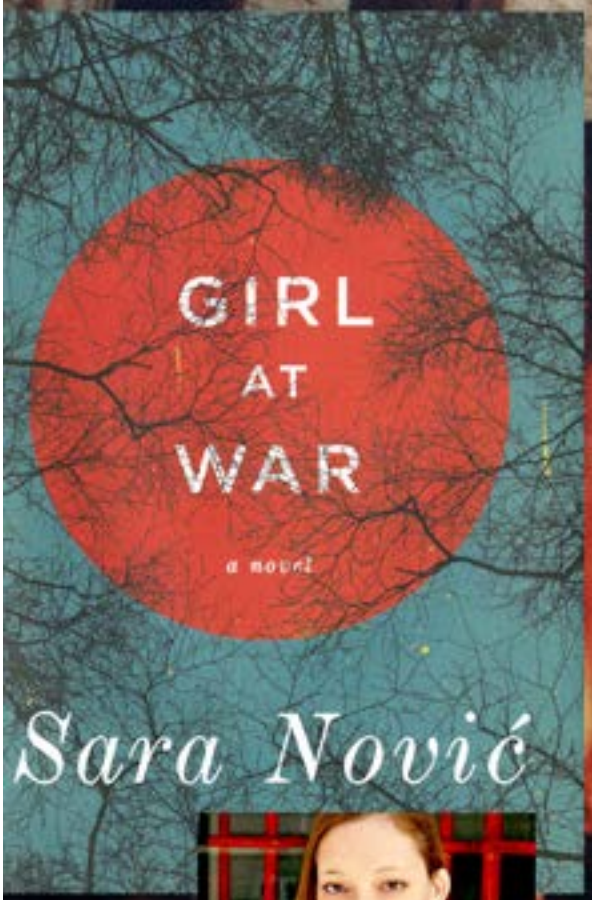
The Eleventh Annual David L. Jannetta Distinguished Lecture in War, Literature & the Arts



Sara Nović

The war in Zagreb began over a pack of cigarettes. There had been tensions beforehand, rumors of disturbances in other towns whispered above my head, but no explosions, nothing outright. Caught between the mountains, Zagreb sweltered in the summer, and most people abandoned the city for the coast during the hottest months. For as long as I could remember my family had vacationed with my godparents in a fishing village down south. But the Serbs had blocked the roads to the sea, at least that's what everyone was saying, so for the first time in my life we spent the summer inland.

—from Girl at War

September 12, 2017
7:15 pm in Fairchild Hall F-1

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Thank you so much for having me here tonight, especially thanks to David Janetta and all the Humanities faculty who made this possible. It's an honor to spend these few days with you.

My own students often ask me why it matters, all this reading and writing. I understand the impulse. As a student who was competent at, but nevertheless disdained math, I was the one to raise my hand in class and whine, "But when are we ever going to use *this* in real life!?" But for literature it feels like an easy question. Writing saved my life.

As a kid, I was weird. Maybe you're not surprised; we writers have a reputation. I mean, really weird, though. Not long into first grade, the teacher called my mom in for a conference. I was so painfully shy she was sure there was something wrong with me, and suggested I be evaluated, psychologically.

My mom had other plans. She bought me a notebook, blue, with ballerinas on it, and commanded me to start a journal. Every day, I would have to sit at the table and write in it until I filled a page. I HATED it. I was a huge tomboy and hated the dumb ballerinas. I hated having to sit at the table when I could be outside; I hated the whole notion of a journal, and writing down my feelings, which I considered girly, and therefore terrible.

And so, every day for a long time, I would write in huge letters so that it filled up most of a page, THIS JOURNAL IS SOOO STUPID.

But then, after a while, something happened. Slowly I began to write a bit about my days at school, or a question I had, something I was trying to figure out. I'd still sign off the end of the entries with some bravado-filled line about how I hated the journal, just in case. But secretly, I liked it. It provided me a space to think, to puzzle out questions I was too embarrassed to ask anyone, to feel afraid or sad or pissed off without some grown up declaring I needed my head examined.

Reading, too, was a safe harbor for me. I read everything. Even when I felt weird or isolated from my peers, or when I couldn't sleep, I knew I couldn't find a friend or a few moments' peace in a novel. Later, as I began to lose my hearing, books became even more important. Before I learned sign language or how to lipread, words on the page were the only thing I could understand. Without written language as a constant and a tool for self-expression and communication, I truly don't know where I would be today.

Maybe growing up as budding scientists and mathematicians and engineers, reading and writing were not your things. But that doesn't mean they won't be useful to you in the future. I can promise you that no matter where you go from here, you're about to see and do things you have never done before. You may need a blank space to think. To puzzle out questions you don't want to ask anyone. To feel afraid or sad or pissed off.

Novels, too, might be the sidekicks you never knew you wanted. Think about it. They are highly portable. They don't need batteries. When you leave here, you will probably yourself far from home, somewhere uncomfortable—too hot or too cold or totally claustrophobic, or lonely. Books can be a lifeline back to the familiar, or a zipline out into the unknown, whether that be a total fantasy world, or a place like Croatia, 1990, before *Game of Thrones* and cruise ships made it cool, before the US or the UN intervened, before we made the nightly news.

I kept journaling through high school, got good grades in English class, but I still consider myself a reluctant writer. I knew the written word had power, and that it calmed and carried me when I was upset. Like Ana's, my father was a storyteller—he made up tall tales as way to teach us things, or just to make us laugh. But I was still the first in my family to go to college, so I expected to study something practical, get a real job. It never occurred to me that writing was something one did out in the open, never mind as a career.

But after high school, when I moved to Croatia to be with family, I saw my first glimpse of the importance of telling war stories. The people who had survived the war needed to talk about it. They wanted other people to know what happened. And they were particularly open with me—I think as a kind of middleman, someone who spoke Croatian but was also markedly American—they told me their experiences in the war, and I wrote them all down in my notebooks.

Later, when I returned to the States for college, I accidentally landed in a creative writing class, some scheduling mix-up—a teacher changed at the last moment, I think. I wrote a short story about the war for the class, the very first iteration of the characters and storyline in *Girl at War*. My mode had changed from journaling to fiction, but my motivation hadn't. I wrote because I was pissed off. I was angry that my friends and family had suffered and lost, and that good, smart, well-read people in America had not heard of this war, or even of the country.

I handed in the story. My professor called me into his office. I was terrified. He said, "This is really good. Is it personal to you?" I said yes, and he said, "You should turn it into a novel."

I don't think I said anything back, but I know I looked at him like, *Yeah, right, buddy. I'll write a novel . . .*

He just said, "You're going write this novel, and you're not going to pull any punches."

So I returned to my dorm room to look up what "pull punches" meant. And then I kept writing.

But I still had a lot to learn, about writing and about war. I'm going to read you one of the parts of the novel now that I wrote pretty early on. Initially, I thought it was going to be the climax of the book. It's action-packed, it's angry (of course), and it's a turning-point.

For those who haven't read the novel, at this point, Ana is 10 years old, and after being lost in rural Croatia, she is taken in by a family—their son's name is Damir. Damir then brings her with him to the Safe House, where a militia has formed, a group trying to defend their town against both Serbian militias, called Ćetniks, and from the JNA—the Jugoslav National Army.

> The Safe House had once been just a regular house, though no one ever spoke of whose it was or what had happened to them. Inside, my eyes watered; the rooms were dim, shutters drawn, and the whole place was cloaked in a nicotine haze. Damir was talking to the front door guards, and I hung as close to him as I could without being a nuisance, studying the house as my vision cleared. On the walls were pictures of well-oiled topless women and the deep-browed, prominent-nosed face even I recognized as General Ante Gotovina, whose likeness was fast becoming the logo of the Croatian resistance. Ultranationalist slogans were spray-painted on every smooth surface: walls, doors, countertops—*za dom, spremni*—for the home, ready. The furniture was smashed, save for one red leather chair in the middle of the kitchen, which no one ever sat in. Gotovina's Chair, we called it.

> I followed Damir up the stairs to the top floor, a single large room that seemed inexplicably bright until I realized a chunk of the roof was missing.
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> "Wait here," he said, and I got nervous. I watched Damir approach an ancient man with glasses so thick the lenses protruded from their frames. They spoke in low voices while I stood in the doorway. Despite the winter chill, just as noticeable inside because of the missing roof, the man wore only jeans and a sleeveless undershirt that revealed dry, scabbed arms. The man looked over at me as Damir talked, then raised a hand in my direction and motioned for me to come. I heard his knees crunch as he bent down to my eye level.
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> "What's your name there?" he said.
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> "She, uh, doesn't talk," Damir said.
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> "Never mind that. We're not looking for speechmakers. We need workers. I can see you're a tough guy." Behind the glasses his eyes were magnified round like an insect's, and I was doubtful about whether he could see anything at all, but I liked that he'd called me tough and I smiled a little. He tugged on the brim of my cap. "An adventurer, maybe?" I didn't know what that had to do with anything, but I wanted the captain to like me, so I nodded. He extended a knobby hand, and I tapped it in a hesitant high five. "Okay. Indiana Jones it is." He pressed himself back into a standing position and put his hand on Damir's shoulder. "Why don't you go set her up with Stallone?"
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> "Yes, sir," Damir said, removing an AK from its spot on a hat rack before guiding me to the back of the room, away from the windows.
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> The Safe House was populated by leftovers: the elderly and teenaged, men too old to be drafted, and boys like Damir technically too young to fight. The Safe Housers had replaced their given names with those of American action movie icons. The house contained two Bruces (a Lee and a Willis), Corleone, Bronson, Snake Plissken, Scarface, Van Damme, Leonardo, Donatello (of the Turtles, not the painters, they were quick to assert), and several men from the next town over who answered to the general appellation Wolverines. Though I didn't know enough about the movies to decode the system, the nicknames were usually assigned by vote and were

somewhat indicative of rank. Damir, for his valor in an operation past, had been awarded the most coveted moniker: Rambo. I was the only girl there.

In the corner we found Stallone, a boy about my age, swathed in ammo belts and sporting an eye patch of indeterminate medical necessity.

"What's your name?" he said.

"She's Indiana," Damir said. "She'll be with you now."

"Indiana Jones?" He seemed impressed. "Where you from?" I looked up at Damir, but he had already gone. "You don't talk?" I shook my head. He raised his hands in a series of gestures synchronous with his speech. "You deaf?" I shook my head again. "My brother's deaf," he said. He pointed to a gunner at the side window, the only person of regular military age in the house. "The Terminator." The floor around Stallone was littered with bullets and cartridges. I cleared a place beside him and sat down. "Okay," he said. "This is how you do it."

From then on I reloaded magazines. My fingers were small and agile, perfect for filling the clips. I sat on the floor with Stallone amid piles of munitions, sorting and loading. The ammo, Stallone said, was smuggled in through Hungary, too. Or Romania, or the Czech Republic—countries who knew what it meant to overthrow a Communist government and were willing to ignore the EU embargo.

Stallone also manned the CB radio, taking in strings of garbled code from other Safe House strongholds across the region, and alerting the captain of JNA plane sightings or Četnik activity in the neighboring towns. Sometimes we picked up broadcasts from the Croatian police force, and I took their coordinates and labeled them on a map on the back wall. When we caught their frequency, Stallone always sent an SOS to see if they were coming to get us, but we never heard back. "Must be busy," Stallone would say and readjust his eye patch.

I'll skip ahead a couple pages here—what happens in the meantime is that Ana gets in the swing of things at the Safe House, and also that some other girls show up, mostly teenagers, who had been on a recon mission.

Sorted munitions made the Safe House run smoother, but the older girls all had their own assault rifles, and I was getting restless. I had proven myself a good worker, I thought, and wanted to fight like everybody else. The following week during morning meetings, when weapons were issued to the new recruits from neighboring villages, I lined up with the rest, tucked my hair up under my cap, and hoped the dirt on my face covered any traces of girlhood. The captain looked me up and down and said there was not enough for everyone. But the next day we took on mortar fire that tore a new hole in the south wall. The captain made Stallone and me lie facedown on floor, and I loathed the familiar feeling of helplessness. I tried to lift my head but could only see boots. Someone fell beside me—I couldn't tell who—and his weapon discharged as he hit the floor. A hollow, wobbling tone filled my ears, then a roaring sound like rushing water. The man was bleeding in spurts from his neck, and I closed my eyes again.

Afterward, I sat up and looked around. Stallone was beside me, pressing his sleeve to a slash across his forehead, saying something I couldn't hear; my ears were still ringing. I took the gun from the dead man next to me, a Wolverine, and slipped its strap over my head. No one noticed. There were three other men on the floor, not moving. Red Sonja had me rip a bedsheet into squares, and she closed the dead men's eyes and covered their faces with the fabric. The Bruces were stacking weapons— guns and knives and brass knuckles newly available. I pushed the gun up against my back and knew from that moment it was mine.

The strongest men heaved the corpses down the stairs and laid them out behind the house, waiting for nightfall so they could transport them to the cemetery at the far end of the village. At dusk Stallone and I went out on recon and counted Četnik casualties. We kicked the bodies, searched their pockets for ammo.

Damir taught me how to fieldstrip and reassemble an AK. Forward grip, gas chamber, cleaning rod, bolt (piston first), frame, magazine.

"Function check!" It meant to cock the gun as a test, the last step in reassembly, but anyone completing the check yelled it triumphantly, a battle cry preceding the first bursts of gunfire. The fieldstrip was a protocol that never changed, and I found solace in the repetition.

The old men let me keep watch while they were eating lunch. Too short to shoot with my feet on the ground, I'd climb up and kneel in the windowsill. I shot over toward the schoolhouse at anything in camouflage moving in the windows, or outside ground-level on the other side of the street, then jumped down and ducked in case a Četnik was clearheaded enough to shoot straight back. With every round I envisioned killing the soldier with the brown teeth, the one who'd struck my father in the back of the knee and laughed. I relished the power that seemed to run through the chamber of the weapon directly up into my own veins.

Occupation under the Četniks was a delicate balance. In their state of perpetual intoxication they'd been satisfied in rape and pillage mode, their genocidal appetites satiated by picking off Safe Housers and the occasional roadside murder of travelers like my parents. The danger of killing too many of us and losing their UN meal ticket staved off any large-scale assaults. But the JNA, closing in on the area, sent reinforcements, and the reinforcements were not yet weary of the place, were not content with exchanging fire from the comfort of the schoolhouse. They had salaries, uniforms, better weapons, and a functioning chain of command. Relatively, they were sober. They were ready to attack.

I was at the attic window keeping watch with the Terminator when we spotted a band of armored vehicles, about ten it looked like, but it was hard to tell from the curve in the road. The trucks were green, not UN issue, and when I looked up at the Terminator he was gesturing frantically. I bolted across the attic to get Stallone, who, upon seeing his brother's signs, yelled, "Holy shit! The JNA! They're coming down the street!" The trucks were closer now, and I could see the red Yugoslavian stars on their doors.

"Let's move!" said the captain, and everyone who'd been without a gun lunged for the extras on the hat rack. I turned to the captain for his next instructions, but from downstairs we heard gunfire, the blowback of broken glass, and the door guards screaming.

"They're here," said Stallone.

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We ran—down the uneven rear stairs and out the back door, through the packed-dirt alley by the market, and out into the wheat fields. The stalks bowed with rotting, grain-laden heads abandoned by farmers when the bombing started, but even in their hunched posture they were taller than I was, and I could see nothing but wheat in all directions. I wondered where Stallone had gone. Then, from a side row, I saw Damir darting toward me.

"You've got speed, girl," he said when he caught up. He grabbed me by the hood of my sweatshirt and yanked me to the left, hard. "No sense of direction, though." The butt of my rifle banged a bruise into the back of my leg as we ran.

A pack of JNA foot soldiers were coming from the other side of the field now; there were at least twenty of them, running in a clean, arrowlike formation. I froze, gaping as they closed the meters between us—one hundred, seventy-five, fifty—but Damir pushed me ahead of him and released a spray of gunfire on them. In the corner of my vision I saw him go down, but he yelled "Don't stop!" so I kept running, made a sharp turn into the field's middle strip. The wind hit my face fresh and hard—my nose dripped and my eyes watered. Dragging my sleeve across my face, I pumped my legs faster until I could no longer feel the ground, until gravity slithered off the treads of my sneakers.

At the center of the field I threw myself beneath a tractor and curled into a compact ball, covering my face with my hands. There was gunfire and yelling from every angle, and I tried to listen for voices I knew. I thought of Damir and waited for the familiar sadness to set in, but found only anger in its place. With one hand I felt the ground for my AK and was relieved to find it there beside me.

So maybe you can see why I thought this scene might be the crux of the book. It's one of the more explicit moments of combat; it's an important point for Ana's character development. It's a moment where, after a huge trauma, she regains a little agency. She has a community of soldiers and a weapon and feels the power in that. And there *is* power in that. This is what we think of first when we think of war, and war literature.

But still, I was wrong—it's not the center of the novel. This is not the moment that makes Ana whole again. And Ana knowing the field strip procedure is not what makes

you care for her. For Ana, and for real soldiers and civilians alike, the real work begins after the smoke clears, after the homecoming.

I flew here to Colorado Springs yesterday, on September 11th. It was a strange feeling. The airports were plastered with banners that said "Never Forget." But forgetting is not the problem. I will never forget that day, the moment I found out what happened. I was a 9th grader in chemistry class. I remember the lab table, the look on my teacher's face. I doubt most people who were old enough can forget such a moment. To remember is easy. The facts of that day are readily retrievable. It's what we do with memory that's important.

And this is another task of literature and art—to bear witness. Looking at the example of the former-Yugoslavia, it's easy to see why stories of the war are necessary. It still a time of reconciliation there, of developing new governments and infrastructures. Parts of Croatia and Bosnia are still being de-mined of cluster bombs. This is essential work. But there's a parallel question running alongside physical reconstruction: what do we put in the history books? How did this happen? Who is responsible? The way this war is documented and taught to the current generation is the single most important factor determining whether or not genocide happens again there.

Knowing facts and figures are important, but when it comes to decision-making, their power of influence pales in comparison to emotion. I'm willing to bet that some disciplines consider this a negative thing, might try to override this tendency with training and preparedness measures. But I say our emotions and our capacity to think beyond the bounds of any plan are what make us people, and we can use that to our advantage, if we're aware of it.

This means your stories, too! I'm sure you know already that less than 1% of the American population is currently serving in the military, and it's been that way for a long time now. That means millions of people have no close family or friends serving. They don't feel the human cost of war, and that's really dangerous. Writing by service people and veterans can change that. It can make them understand, not on the grand socio-political scale, but from one human with skin and bones and feelings, to another.

Finally, if your writing process is anything like mine, writing is great practice at being wrong. *Girl at War* took me more than five years to write. I write by hand, so I am extra slow, crossing out and then typing and retyping. The whole second section of the book was scrapped multiple times. Brian was cut and added back in; I constantly messed with the novel's timeline. I wrote a draft that started in the present day and jumped back in time afterward—it was terrible! I wrote a version in which I moved between the past and present in every other chapter—super confusing! This is part of the job, and one's aptitude for writing is so often inversely proportional to how

much you fuck up while doing it. No one makes more mistakes, or revises more, than professional writers.

Likewise, as leaders in your field, you too must be the absolute best at being wrong. To serve your country is honorable, and no doubt your commitment comes from deep reserves of patriotism, tradition, and love of all that America stands for. But to love something, or some place, does not mean to blindly and relentlessly insist on its perfection. There must be space for revision—for identifying and admitting mistakes, for reconfiguring, regrouping, and redesigning. You must have the eye for detail to pinpoint a problem, and the capacity to think creatively to solve it.

It's no accident that Ana's father, a storyteller, saves her life on the edge of that mass grave by convincing her to play a game. Much of war, and certainly genocide, does not follow the rules; it isn't rational. Quick thinking and creativity are so often the only chance for survival.

But thinking creatively is a muscle. It must be stretched and built up. To read, and to imagine faraway places and fictitious characters is the best exercise.

Empathy, too, is requires creativity. It's hard to see things from another's point of view, even harder to imagine what they might feel. But fiction is in the business of helping us practice empathy, because more than any other medium it imitates the way we build relationships in real life. The reason we love someone—say, your best friend—is not because of his or her physiological or demographic statistics. It's their favorite dumb joke and the sound of their laugh, a shared memory of the time you got in trouble at the community pool, your mutual love of Cool Ranch Doritos. It's in the details. In the same way—despite being from an unfamiliar place—Ana becomes a three-dimensional person for you because you know her innermost thoughts about books, about her boyfriend, and all that she's lost.

Ana is not a real person, but that doesn't mean there is no truth to her. In reality there are many Anas, people who have endured what she did, and worse—in the former Yugoslavia, and all across the globe. It is happening right now, sure as I stand before you.

How important it is for you then, as future leaders, not only to see suffering, but to feel it, to know the cost of war not only quantitatively, or as mission goals in the abstract, but in your gut, real pain same as you feel, real blood same as you and your airmen bleed.

There is a moment at the start of *Girl at War* where Ana's schoolmate's brother is killed, and she sees her friend for the first time after the incident, at the air raid shelter.

> I saw Tomislav underground during a raid two days later. The rest of us were shoving in line for the generator bike when he showed up. We stopped pushing and stared. The starkness in his eyes scared me much more than if he had been crying. The boy who was riding stopped without discussion. Tomislav passed us and mounted the bicycle.
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> For a moment I watched him as he pedaled furiously, turning his pain into power, something tangible and scientific. Then we dissolved the line and moved to another corner of the shelter to give him some privacy, which seemed like the right thing to do according to the code of wartime behavior we were making up as we went along.

For me, this moment is a metaphor for the potential of literature in your lives, and in our world at large. To create light out of darkness, something tangible from abstraction. Pain into power. That's why we write, and what we stand to gain.