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*Girl at War*  
a Conversation with Sara Novic

Sara Novic's debut novel *Girl at War* subtly undoes what most of us, who haven't actually survived a conflict, thought we knew about war. Novic's fictional, but historically accurate work reveals the atrocities of Yugoslavia's civil war from the perspective of 10-year old Ana. Despite her youth, readers readily connect with Ana's struggles in identity and finding her home in the world; these universal themes are important to Novic's work and to us.

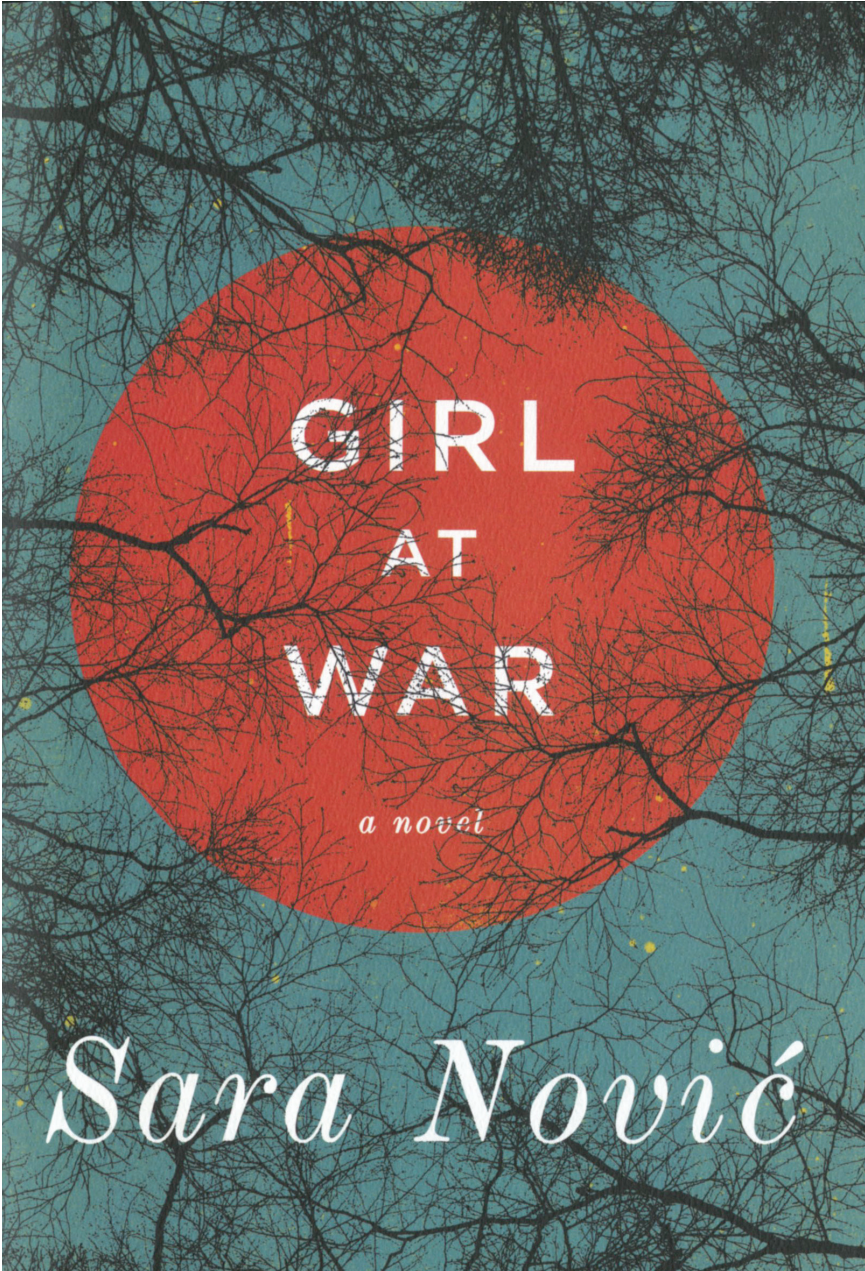
Our reckoning with the war in Zagreb begins over the simplest of details, "a pack of cigarettes." Other details present a typical child, in a typical home. Ana plays. Ana attends school. Ana has a family and a close friend. Relatives live nearby. But then life is interrupted. Violence creeps in via sentences that bait us to learn more: "It happened when I was running errands for my mother." And, just like that, war enters uninvited to a child's world. We are with Ana, as she is with her parents, in witnessing the sheer brutality of their bodies falling into trenches; in fact, "They Both Fell" was, according to Novic, almost the title of the novel.

Although she varies the novel's timeline to ensure that we do not become fatigued by such violence, the cognitive dissonance created by the overlap of peaceful and warring worlds proves jarring. Ana's friends search for definitions of "air raids" in one sentence and immediately follow with questions about who will be the playground goalie in the next. Adults too are caught-up in the denial: "'They're killing them,' the man said. 'Who?' said my father, studying the paper for clues. 'Everyone.'" To which Ana's mother routinely but disconnectedly asks who would like soup? From shooting from "blown-

out windows” “then in the next moment play[ing] cards and [having] footraces,” we slide into a new normal. Shot out eyeballs, become liquid that runs like eggs, necklaces are made from human ears, and Ana the child morphs into Ana the soldier.

Ana-the-child-soldier’s anesthetization to fear later mutes her grown-up identity. She first returns home, “...shocked to find people were still living out normal existences here in [her] building, that their lives had not stalled as [hers] had.” Ana’s adult return to Croatia lends voice to lingering questions: Where is home? What is my identity? How does language evoke memory? When Ana finds time for the answers, Novic actually delights in the poetic. She answers these questions with beautifully rich sentences such as: “I woke up in the cobalt part of dawn.” Ultimately, Ana’s questions *are* answered and she aligns with a simple identity, “The one who lived.” Still, her reconciliation with the past completes in pieces: “Now I stood before the inlay, pressed my hand into the contours of his, and considered how easy it was to erase a family.” Ana won’t be erased. In other words, Ana’s personal war story, her journey, is born first and foremost from an impressive range of clear, powerful writing.

*Girl at War* embraces the unique demands of what makes war narrative, as a genre, successful: raw emotion and disbelief, violence and horror, imbedded in a personal story. Yet, despite these characteristically similar elements, writing about loss and trauma is complicated. We are invited if not called to bear witness to our own ignorance, culpability, or both. Novic ensures we pay attention. And, in the process, we become vulnerable as readers to our own notions of identity, place, and home. In-person, Sara Novic describes herself as a “reluctant writer,” someone who knows writing does something important for her. Thank goodness, we benefit from what her talent and imagination does for us too.



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The interview which follows offers additional context and insight on Sara Novic's thinking behind and motivation for *Girl at War*:

**I would like to start with your title, *Girl at War*, especially the word “at.” Toward the end of Section I and in Section IV Ana is at war militarily, but “at” implies she is warring in other ways also. Do you see her at war with herself and others? If so, how and why? Is there any resonance for you in the Theodore Roethke question, “what is madness but nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?”**

I definitely think Ana is at war with both herself and others in an emotional/spiritual way, in addition to the times when she is physically experiencing warfare. She struggles with guilt for having survived, and also feels a great deal of rage, I think because she can't find peace, or even know where to start seeking such a thing. To that end, there is certainly resonance in the Roethke quote for Ana—for me, this is most visible in her time in the States where she feels an inability to connect with her peers or even her family, because her soul's experiences and desires are so at odds with her current life.

**Because of its first-person narration, your novel suggests there might be autobiographical content to it? Could you say what in the novel parallels your own life, what transforms facts from your life, what you invented?**

Ana is a completely fictional character, in that I know no one personally who shares her story. That said, there are details about her personality—her tom-boyishness, the protectiveness she feels over her younger sister—with which I certainly identify. Imbuing bits and pieces of oneself in otherwise fictional characters is part of the excitement of writing for me. Some of the ancillary characters in the novel, for example Ana's friends Luka and Tomislav, much more closely parallel “real life” people I know in Zagreb, while some are completely imagined.

With respect to the war at large, I worked hard in my research to ensure that, though Ana's own journey is fiction, it still fits correctly into the historical timeline of the war, so that her story is as factually accurate as possible, since her struggles were real for many.

**What compositional struggles did you have in writing your novel in keeping some distance between you as author and Ana?**

Since Ana's life isn't mine, it wasn't so hard for me to keep a distance between me and the character. However, in earlier drafts of the novel, I did have some trouble coming to terms with the fact often times when I wrote war scenes I knew to be factually true, (things taken from research, interviews, or the stories of my extended family) these were the sections that my classmates always pegged as "unbelievable." And why should it be? So often the reality of war isn't rational. And that's the trick of fiction—it's not enough for a story to be true in the real world; it's still the job of the writer to make it feel vivid and real in the world of the book.

**Ana "goes home" to Croatia in order to make some sort of peace with both home and her past, then, at the novel's end, she is ready to "go home" to America. Do you see the novel as a kind of fictional refutation of the claim that "you can't go home again"? Her psychic mission accomplished, why not stay in Croatia? What is the pull of America?**

I think Ana might actually agree with the claim that "you can't go home again"—this is, I think, the goal of genocide: to *erase* home. More importantly for Ana then, is the task of making a new home, or homes, in the face of those ruins. As such, I think the pull of America for Ana is mostly Rahela. Many people ask me if I have a sequel planned for this book. I don't, but if I look into the future of these characters, I imagine Ana and Rahela's relationship would take center stage as Rahela grows older and has more questions herself.

**Two authors Ana reads are W.G. Sebald and Rebecca West, and I presume you have read both also. Could you comment on what they and their books have meant to you as an author?**

I have always loved Sebald, in part because I'm so impressed by the way he deals with war indirectly in his writing. None of his books are exactly "war stories"; rather, war and violence permeate the marrow of each of his novels, and I think this a powerful commentary on the way in which war stays with people.

With respect to West, my experience with her was quite similar to Ana's. I came across her book later in the writing process, and was skeptical about whether it would still be relevant to a region so changed, but her descriptions are quite beautiful, and the book provides historical context that is still relevant today.

**What went into your decision not to have Ana tell her story chronologically? And what went into your decision to divide her story into four parts? Did you have any literary models for that latter decision (such dramatic tragedies)?**

I always knew that I wanted this story to be told non-chronologically; even in its earliest iteration as a short story it jumped back and forth in time. Part of the reason for this was that I was doing extensive research into the intrusive nature of trauma, and thinking about the ways in which our ability to sort the past and present is at the mercy of that trauma. The Faulkner quote, “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past,” was on my mind a lot at the time.

I also thought it would be good to break up the more violent war sections for the sake of the reader—in addition to creating tension as the reader wants to understand the missing pieces, I hope it also prevents readers from becoming fatigued by the graphic nature of war sequences and “checking out” mentally.

That said, though I always knew I wanted to move non-chronologically, I didn’t know where I wanted to start or with what frequency I should switch. I didn’t consciously use any model texts, but I experimented a lot—for example, in one draft I started in the present day and jumped back and forth with every other chapter, and that was just terrible!

**Such characters as Ana’s American parents, Ms. Stanfeld, and Brian come across as wanting to “help” Ana but can’t access her inner self and struggles. Can others ever really help? Must we relive the past in order to free ourselves from it?**

While creating characters like Brian and Ana’s American parents, I played around a bit with how patient and understanding they should be of Ana’s relentlessness in shutting them out, but in the end, I think making them as kind and helpful as possible really just underscores the fact that outside forces can only do so much when it comes to another’s mental health. There was really nothing anyone could have done for Ana, no matter how well-meaning, and that’s one of the most difficult parts about war and trauma.

**Ana finds that those who never left Croatia have willed personal amnesia about what happened in their effort to forget what Ana wants to remember. Could you say a few words about memory and its place in your theory of fiction writing in general and in the novel in particular?**

I started writing this novel in part to chronicle stories that friends and family had told to me about the war, and in part because I was angry that people in the US knew so little about what had happened in my family's homeland, so this book was literally fueled by memories. But I also think books are important vehicles via which to incite remembering—people often write to me saying that they knew nothing about these wars, but that Ana has stuck with them and inspired them to do some research. This is the best possible thing I can hear from readers, and speaks, I think, to the ultimate goal of fiction for me—creating empathy between characters and readers of vastly different worlds.

**The human need for collecting and telling stories is something which concerns Ana. How would you describe yourself as a story-teller?**

As mentioned, this project began as a collection of stories from friends and extended family. I've always been an avid journaler, a habit my mother instilled in me as a kid because I was extremely shy, and she thought it would be good for me to express my emotions on paper. When I was in Croatia as a teenager, these stories began to fill my journal, and then, over the years, slowly morphed into full (and fictional) characters. I think most of the stories I write develop this way—they start with a kernel of something I see or know of the real world, and then spin out into something bigger and more imagined the more time I stay with them.

**Could you say a few words about gender in the novel as a whole and in Ana's consciousness in particular? War novels, with some recent exceptions, have been a genre mostly inhabited by men. In both planning and executing the novel, was it your intention to turn the generic tide?**

In the very first iteration of this story, a short story I wrote for a college class, Ana was actually a ten-year-old boy. I changed her in the next draft, and I truthfully can't even speak exactly to why I did, except maybe it was a way for me to identify more directly with her. However, the more I wrote, the more I realized it was important for us to have a war story from a female perspective. After all, women and children suffer so much in every war, but their perspectives are so rarely heard.

**I think one can read your novel as one long fictional meditation on the topic of "home." Ana's first home and those who share it are destroyed; her second home provides for everything external, but something is missing from it; she returns**

**to her first home in search of something which takes the rest of the novel to make clear; at the end of the book she is ready to be home, though it is left as open-ended what that home will be. Could you comment?**

The question of “home,” of straddling cultures and languages is one that I think about often, not only as someone with family spread across continents, but also as a deaf woman navigating between English and sign language. I don’t have any succinct answers about what home means or where it is for we who live on the dividing lines of multiple worlds, but I suspect that is why I write about it—if I knew the answers I’d write a boring book.

**Section II of the novel is called “Somnambulist” In what ways is it about sleep-walking as a metaphor for living? Are the Croatians Ana meets when she returns sleep-walking? Are Americans? Must we have a Civil War or a 9/11 in order to wake-up? Is Ana’s task to wake up from childhood?**

Ana is definitely who I had in mind with that section title, not only with her nightmares and insomnia, but also due to the nature of her relationships—with Brian, with her American parents—she is treading water with all of them, in part because she doesn’t know what to do, and then maybe later because she is afraid to do what she knows she must.

I hadn’t really thought of the sleep-walking nature as applied to Americans, but it does also speak to the ways in which we experience war here at home versus those who fight our wars, and those who live through them abroad. For the average civilian, especially one who doesn’t know anyone serving, America’s wars can feel on another plane of reality, dream-like, and without a full understanding of their consequences.

**In college Ana writes a paper on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel which rewrites *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Rochester’s wife who is locked away in an attic. What story or stories might we say Ana is rewriting? Did you rewrite stories in your novel?**

I think Ana is, through her journey, rewriting her personal history, and through that a piece of Croatian history. The goal of genocide is to erase personal histories, to make them unrecoverable, evidenced here in the unanswered questions Ana is left with, but at the same time she is alive, and that in itself is a kind of rewriting of the narrative. I hope *Girl at War* functions in this way, too. On a smaller scale, I think Ana’s story can



also be seen as a rewriting of the “Stribor’s Forest” fairytale, which is a real Yugoslavian folk story.

**Could you say a few words about Ana’s relationship to Luka, especially when she returns to Croatia as an adult? What does he have to teach her? How and why is he more adult than Ana? Ana believes her life has stalled; has his, and if not, why not?**

On one hand, Ana and Luka’s relationship is ideal in that they still feel very close to one another after a decade of not having spoken; I think many people have a childhood friend with whom they can reconnect as if no time has passed, and I like that their relationship is unremarkable in that way.

That said, both have processed the war in very different ways—Ana alone and far away, and Luka alongside a community of traumatized people, where the war and its evidence are inescapable. There’s no way of saying whether one method is “better” than the other, but I think the fact that Luka has remained living in the same place makes him more pragmatic than Ana by necessity; he has no choice in dodging those memories.

That Luka feels more “adult” than Ana might be a result of city living versus Ana’s suburban life in America, and the early independence that comes with the former. In the end, I think both Ana and Luka’s lives were stalled in different ways: Ana’s because she couldn’t process what had happened to her or form new relationships, and Luka’s because he daily faces the realities of life in a postwar society, reconstruction, and the corruption and unemployment that threaten to undo a new society. Both of them represent different aspects of a generation that had, and continues to have, struggles directly rooted in the war of their childhood.

**Your novel is now out, being read and reviewed, and taught. Have you had any second thoughts about changes you wish you had made in it? Have you had any responses which have made you think again? Is there a second novel coming soon?**

I try not to think about the book in that way, because if left to it I would probably keep editing it forever, and now that the book’s out in the world in the lives of others, it’s impossible for me to control the way others experience or interpret it. Occasionally I hear from people of Serbian heritage who feel slighted by the book, though I also often hear from them when they’ve had a positive response to the novel, seeing their own suffering (of which there was a lot) mirrored in its pages despite which side of

the ethnic divide Ana happened to fall upon. Though for those upset by the novel, I think it's important to remember that it is in fact a novel, and not even an epic, a pretty narrowly-scoped story—just one little girl's perspective. There were hundreds of thousands of people affected by this war, and this book, nor any single book, can possibly tell all their stories. We need more books!

I *am* working on a new novel. It's unrelated to Ana and the former-Yugoslavia, though it does deal with some of the same themes, like language, identity, and finding one's home in the world.



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