



Interview

Vesna Goldsworthy

Mutual Exotization: Europe and the Balkans

Interview with Belfjore Qose and Christian Voß¹

Vesna Goldsworthy is currently professor of creative writing at the University of Exeter and the University of East Anglia. Her first book was “Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination” (1998) in which she applies the constructivist and orientalist paradigm to Southeast Europe and depicts Balkan stereotypes in Western European travel writings and popular culture since the myth of Dracula. A dense summary of this reference work can be found in the anthology “The Balkans and the borders in the head” edited mostly in German in 2004 by Karl Kaser in the Austrian Wieser encyclopedia. Only from the very title an attentive reader could understand twenty years ago that Goldsworthy is way too good and too creative for a “normal academic”, so she switched to literature.

Her memoir “Chernobyl Strawberries” from 2005 tells the story of her childhood and youth in Yugoslav Serbia. The German translation with the title “Heimweh nach Nirgendwo” was highly praised by Elke Heidenreich who after her career as a cabaret artist became popular as a book reviewer on TV and radio and was widely received. Goldsworthy’s poetry in “The Angel of Salonika” and her recent novels such as “Gorsky” and “Monsieur Ka” transpose her personal experience of migration, acculturation and intercultural perception and misunderstandings to London during the Cold War and the East-West bloc confrontation. In her forthcoming novel “Iron Curtain”, she describes an East-West love affair of a privileged red princess in a Soviet satellite state in the 1980s and Iason, a gifted young Anglo-Irish poet on the make.

In 2021 Vesna Goldsworthy has been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London.

¹ This interview is part II of a series “Balkan-World Literatures”, organized on 14 April 2021 by the Berlin Branch of Southeast European Association at Humboldt University Berlin. Belfjore Qose is Professor for World Literature and Slavic Literatures at Tirana University, founding member of the Young Academy of the Albanian Academy of Sciences and a well-known poet. Christian Voss is professor and head of the Department for South Slavic Studies at Humboldt University Berlin and founding director of the Centre “Crossing Borders”.

Interview

Belfjore Qose: I'm beginning with "Inventing Ruritania – The Imperialism of the Imagination" where you analyse the imagology of the Balkans by mainly two sources, the literary imagination and the notable memoirs (mostly by female travelers), and in both cases the facts are mixed with fiction, or at least are affected by perspective. The interesting fact is that the Balkans have been considered as an "exotic" space and this comes mainly through romanticism or pure imagination on the other. In my perspective I would ask: exotic for whom? Some years ago I translated an article by Kazuo Ishiguro right after he won the Nobel Prize in which he sincerely expressed how Britain was the most "exotic" culture to him, with the royalty and the complicated rules of living and behaving in society. This was the reason behind his most "exotic" protagonist, in his novel "Remains of the Day", the butler who represented to him the core of his curiosity for the British culture. But English literature and travelers consider as exotic the Byzantine and Ottoman affected countries of Eastern Europe. Anyway, this goes back in the past and in the Albanian case I believe we haven't been careful in dealing with what we are responsible for, as for example we still teach Lord Byron's verses on Albania with no critical analysis in our schools, but as if he was realistically representing the Albanians of the early 19th century! What can be done to critically analyse these sources of Balkan image to West Europe and most importantly put them in the right context by understanding the motifs, mindset and perspective of the authors of their time? You achieve this in your book, but I mean regarding a wider public, which is better covered by media, schools etc.

Vesna Goldsworthy: You're absolutely right when you say that I tend to focus on fiction set in the Balkans. Insofar as I look at non-fiction I tend to focus on women writers in the Balkans. Although "Inventing Ruritania" tries to be comprehensive in its coverage, when I started this research I was particularly interested in fiction by those writers who had never visited the Balkans.

Before I became a creative writer, I was professor in English literature and my particular specialism was the 19th century. I was particularly fascinated by those novelists who wrote about the Balkans without ever setting foot on the peninsula. As far as I was concerned, the less they knew, the less interested in the Balkans they were, the more interested I was in their work. I wanted to find out what it is that those writers knew about the Balkans when they said they knew nothing. I started my research on it in the late 1980s, focusing in particular on Romania, on writers ranging from Bram Stoker to Olivia Manning.

This turned out to be a lucky move, because unbeknown to me, the historian Maria Todorova was preparing her book on the Balkans and she actually focused on more historical and factual writing. So we were, without knowing about each other, complementing each other through our different academic focus.

In Romania I found the kernel of my future book project in Bram Stoker and his vampires and in particular Dracula. What I was already aware of is that in this part of the world, in Britain, in America, you can be four or five, preschool age, not yet able to read or write, know nothing about the Balkans, but you will know Dracula. You will know the vampires, you will know Transylvania. Dracula therefore was an obvious entry point for me, the way in which those popular fictions colonised the imagination from as early as you like. And the way they function: Bram Stoker was absolutely uninterested in the Balkans as the region, other than as fodder for his writing.

Now women's writing is a different topic. I could give a whole lecture on that. The reason I was interested in women was that, partly through my feminist academic interest, I realised that British women going to the Balkans could become "honorary men" the moment they set foot there. They were treated with a kind of respect the men were accorded and they were given access to places that they absolutely didn't have back home.

So for British women the Balkans were a kind of area of freedom and power that they were lacking at home. Edith Durham is a great example of that. Particularly in the late 19th century, you find these women who had very restricted lives, for example looking after their elderly parents as Durham did. They were trapped at home and suddenly they go to the Balkans and they become female Byrons themselves, since you mentioned Byron.

So your final point, is: is this exotic to whom? We are mutually exotic: for Albanians Byron is as exotic and strange as they are to him. I read the excerpt from my memoir “Chernobyl Strawberries” in the introduction and you see the same thing at work. When I was about to move to London, my next door neighbour in Belgrade brought “Wuthering Heights” in order to illustrate her point that I will be miserable in England. The English weather is awful. In her imagination this is the place of lashing rain and the wild moors and probably Heathcliff running across them towards me. But that exoticism of Britain, as viewed from central Belgrade, doesn’t have political consequences. My neighbour has no power, just as we as a small country would never have had any power over Britain. Whereas British attitudes towards the Balkans do have political consequences and are much more influential. So, as in your question, exoticism works both ways, but I was interested in the direction of power.

Christian Voß: You mentioned Maria Todorova’s book “Imagining the Balkans” which appeared almost at the same time, in 1997, your book is from 1998. You’re very similar but also complementary because Todorova emphasizes the relevance and effectiveness of the Balkanism discourse among political decision makers. My question goes to the limits of intertextuality. To give you one example, last year the Kosovo theater group “Qendra Multimedia” performed a video with the title “The Return of Karl May – an entertaining play for the German people” at the famous Volksbühne here in Berlin. The starting point was negative and exoticizing external ascriptions about Albanians by the famous western author Karl May. However, nobody knows these novels in Germany. What I want to say: without intertextuality, texts have no discursive power – so what about the resonance and the affective radius of the texts you examined in 1998, what is the situation in pro-Brexit England, does this influence the accession process of the Western Balkans countries until today?

Vesna Goldsworthy: To go back to the 1990s, one of the things that is interesting and perhaps lucky for Balkan scholarship is that Maria and I, without knowing of each other, have covered different territories. My theoretical inspirations were primarily around Edward Said’s work on orientalism. Milica Bakic-Hayden’s article on nesting orientalisms appeared in 1992 as I was half way through the doctoral thesis which would become “Inventing Ruritania”. Larry Woolf’s “Inventing Eastern Europe” came out just as I was finishing it: it proved to me that there was something in the air.

One of the shared characteristics of the very many books that I examined, be it “Dracula” that I mentioned, be it the “Prisoner of Zenda”, or the “Orient Express” stories, is that very often as novels they might have been almost forgotten but for the power of film versions. In many cases you will have a dozen film and TV versions. Some of these popular novels would be remade every decade and transmitted in that way. It sometimes seems that “Dracula” is remade every year!

I looked at the power and resonance of film. You mentioned one very interesting issue by referring to Karl May: if these books are forgotten, should I have actually tried to resurrect them, make them famous again? Many of the novels I discuss are well-known because of the film versions, but there are literally hundreds of others that I refer to in “Inventing Ruritania” which were completely forgotten and were actually better left forgotten. Often a writer would strike it lucky with one Balkan story and then try many more: after Dracula, Bram Stoker wrote a terrible novel set in Montenegro; Anthony Hope has half a dozen after Ruritania. His “Sophie of Kravonia” is really bad.

If I was really working against Balkan prejudices, I should have just put those novels aside and let them be forgotten in dusty libraries, right? But one reason I didn't do that was that I was absolutely staggered by the sheer numbers of books. There were years in the late 19th and early 20th century when you would literally have 20 or 30 popular novels set in the Balkans. They were coming out almost monthly. The thirst of the audience for Balkan sensationalism was insatiable: it's a kind of deluge if you want. The Balkans – the Near East as it was then often called – was the popular area of great mystery. And just like your Germans with the Kosovo production of Karl May, the contemporary British readers were frequently completely unaware of this heritage. So, when they were reading "Inventing Ruritania" they were asking "Who are these people? Are you sure that they were so influential? That they were so important?" They were, but luckily enough they are forgotten.

You don't hear so much about the Balkans in Britain nowadays, and that is perhaps OK. There is that quote from Barbara Jelavich which I mention in "Inventing Ruritania" that the Balkans have only impinged on Western consciousness at times of war or violence, and, if it is like that, then I hope that we are forgotten for good. In that sort of sense, obscurity is probably a better destiny.

Belfjore Qose: In "Inventing Ruritania" you elaborate the difference between representing and creating a certain image. "Such imaginative colonization" compared to traditional imperialism or "economic colonization" appears to be an innocent process: a cultural great power seizes and exploits the resources of an area, while imposing new frontiers on its mind-map and creating ideas which, reflected back, have the ability to reshape reality. It is obvious that while a dominating and influencing culture has a certain image for another culture, it has the inevitable power to create a certain mind-map. I am really interested in the mind-map it creates on the individual's self, respectively in the person from the Balkans who is influenced by such an imagology. While many Albanians immigrate to countries with stronger economies, they leave at least with discontent and they need to feel part of the new culture, which is perceived as superior, thus Albanians easily believe what they hear about themselves and their country of origin. On the other hand, the way we perceive Europe is that of a distant culture, a different place, while geographically we are part of this continent. You can easily hear proud Greek parents bragging that their child is studying in Europe or in Albanian media you can notice the over-usage of the question "When will Albania enter Europe?", and not the European Union! I can't help but mention Ernesto Sabato in his novel "On Heroes and Tombs" while he ironically refers to the admiration Jorge Luis Borges has for the European, and in fact the British culture that "only one who is not European can be a Eurocentrist, one who is a European is just a European". How can we escape this complex and the imagined self that distorts even the facts we know for sure about ourselves?

Vesna Goldsworthy: This particular idea of Europeanness and this sort of oscillation is so excellently described by your question. It is at the centre of my research. I would say that there is a kind of brittleness there in the sense that both the concept of *Us* and *Them* and the idea of superiority and inferiority seesaws, right? I am not sure if it is like that in Albania but certainly in former Yugoslavia, and particularly in Serbia where I come from, this idea of European superiority surfaces very often: the European way of doing things is superior, more civilised than the Balkan way. If someone does something primitive on public transport, people say: "Balkan!" But, conversely, there is that brittle superiority of the place of origin. So, Belgrade University degrees are harder to obtain than those in the West, our students are better than Western European students, our schools are better, we read more etc. We want our children to do their MAs somewhere in the West even when it is quite difficult to have those diplomas properly recognised (nostrified) back home.

When I first wrote “Inventing Ruritania” I wondered whether I was right to emphasise this idea so much, to compare physical colonisation – the ways in which Britain with its power exploited particular regions of the world directly – with the situation of imagining a place, exploiting its resources imaginatively, using a place for settings of what seemed naive, innocent works of fiction. So I thought, am I really right to be saying this? Am I exaggerating? In fact I really do feel vindicated because I often saw how far political decision-making processes are influenced and underpinned by those ideas. Of course it may not be the same sort of thing superficially. If you destroy the cotton industry of India by flooding the market with cheap British manufacture, it’s not the same as Graham Greene writing a novel which is set in some muddy village and calling it Subotica, while disregarding the fact that Subotica is in reality a beautiful and cultured art-nouveau town. It’s not the same thing, but the consequences do have their parallels. You make your decisions about that beautiful art-nouveau town on the basis that in your head it’s a muddy village full of primitive people, that needs sorting out. It’s kind of analogous and it’s equally insidious.

Inside the Balkans themselves, we often use these same images against each other. It is always your neighbour to the south and to the east that is Balkan and primitive, until you hit the sea somewhere. So if you are in Slovenia you will hear particular prejudices about Croatia, in Croatia it’s about Bosnia and Serbia, in Serbia it’s about Albania etc. We have internalised the same ideas.

Belfore Qose: I’d like to go on with this symbolic image of the Balkans between West and East or as you write “an overlapping of imagined spaces”. This is one of the most persistent symbolic images of our peninsula. The most prominent Albanian linguist and one of the most cultivated academics in Albania Eqrem Çabej wrote a book “Albania between West and East” emphasising this image through a historical, political, linguistic and above all cultural analysis of the importance of this borderline space. In “Ruritania” you also elaborate this symbolic image, “the Eastern and Western Roman Empires and their Christian successor churches, the Islamic and Christian world, the communist and the capitalist, all met and clashed in the Balkans. While the Balkans themselves could be represented as a multitude of (sometimes tragically overlapping) peripheries, where the cultural ripples created by the great imperial centres outside the Peninsula clash to form interesting patterns even as they subside, individual Balkan identities were shaped over the centuries by the idea of a frontier existence on which they based their own sense of importance. Various Balkan nations symbolically define themselves as being a gate, or a bridge, or at crossroads between different worlds.” How do you think this affected both megalomania and the inferiority complex amongst Balkan countries? I recall also how St. Sava or Despina Cristodoulu consider this position.

Vesna Goldsworthy: This idea of centre and periphery is at the heart of self-image. And that self-perception of being “east in the west, and west in the east”, this is a topic more pertinent for the study of Balkan literatures rather than the study of English literature. In English literature you have this idea of the Balkans as an exotic and exciting periphery, but periphery nonetheless. However, in the Balkans we derive the sense of our great importance precisely from being the borderline: the whole idea of being THE frontier gives us the sense of centrality. You mentioned there the idea of us precisely as defenders of Europe, the Antemurale Christianitatis, the bulwark of Christianity, against the advancing Ottoman Empire. Then the Ottoman land is itself between east and west, so these kinds of overlaps go on. That continues to this day: do the Balkans defend Europe from migrant hordes? Does Turkey?

And I think such self-perceptions also feed endless conspiracy theories that we are so prone to. Somehow even when we are peripheral and seemingly forgotten, we are at the

centre of secret political designs. In British writing, the Balkans is an absolute periphery, the end of the known world.

You mentioned "Inventing Ruritania" and the Ruritanian idea. It is worth remembering that Ruritania itself has migrated. When Anthony Hope wrote his famous novel "The Prisoner of Zenda", he actually noted that the kingdom of Ruritania was two hours ride south of Dresden. Now if you ride a horse south of Dresden for about two hours you can't get much further than Prague. Ruritania wasn't originally Balkan but very much Central European.

When I was editing the final version of the book someone in the marketing department at my publishers suggested that I should call it "Inventing Transylvania". I responded: "I'm not sure that's a good title. Transylvania is a real place." They said: "Oh, is it?" If, just twenty-five years ago, they still thought Transylvania was an imaginary, fictional place, you could certainly continue to insert Syldavia, Slavonia, Slovakia, or anything that begins with *sl-* anywhere on that same Balkan map.

Bridging Genres

Christian Voß: I think we could now switch to Vesna's more recent writings. For me, the fascinating thing about her oeuvre is the versatility of genres: did you foresee this sequence of works? What kind of tips can you give us to become writers? Is it about transferring your own horizon of experience into new genres, or is it, on the contrary, more about hiding your own biography and bringing it to other, but similar, content? For example, I found the following parallels in "Chernobyl Strawberries": you mention your father-in-law who, as a British military man in India after decolonisation, became just as homeless as you are as an ex-Yugoslavian. This British technocratic elite can be found in the family of the husband of the heroine from *Monsieur Ka*. Hence my question: is this a common technique of transposing? Do you actually describe your new British familiar environment?

Vesna Goldsworthy: Your question can be answered in many ways, some more humorous than others! I can joke and say that I moved into more commercial genres because I wanted to have proper bestsellers and the academic world never takes you there. But the truth is more complex. After I wrote "Inventing Ruritania", I had a feeling that I was wrestling for another big theme, for another big idea. In a sense – and I should probably ask you to confirm that, as specialists more rooted in the area – I have a feeling that since the late 1990s, I mean this particular concept of Balkanism and what I was doing with the imperialism of the imagination in "Inventing Ruritania", there was no big overarching grand idea in terms of scholarship.

There was some excellent work, for sure, but nothing seemed quite as illuminating and new as what was happening in the late 1990s. I certainly couldn't come up with anything as inspiring. Yes, I could have gone into smaller projects, but although I continued to research for a while nothing particularly interested me. You get this often when you produce a big breakout book: you keep being invited to give the same lectures, write the same articles, but that was not for me.

So I was looking into Balkan travel writing, or individual writers, individual countries, but the work never seemed as exciting as what I was doing with "Inventing Ruritania". There was no new paradigm, if you want, for me. What then happened, and this is a rather unfortunate circumstance that changed my life completely, is that I had cancer and I wanted to write a memoir for my son. Just in case. I thought, if I don't survive this, I will leave a book of my life, of my lost country, with some photographs, with my voice in it. I had no great ambitions, I only wanted a project I would enjoy in that dark phase. What surprised me was the success of that very private book about an ordinary life.

At that early stage still, if you had asked me whether I was then going to go back to academic work I would've given you a resounding yes. I thought of the memoir as something that I did while I was battling cancer. So in some ways it is the fiction that was the surprise of this later stage of my life. I wouldn't have foreseen that particular move. My students now say, are you going to write film scripts? What's next? Because they think that I'm somehow addicted to innovating in terms of genres. What actually happened is a gradual, and more considered move. In Britain you have this particular system of auditing research every six years – research assessment – which means that you cannot easily teach outside the area in which you research.

So once I'd written the successful memoir I also somehow changed my academic career. What actually happened was that I was encouraged to teach creative writing. At first I thought, what discipline is that, is that really academic? I didn't think I would enjoy it, but in the end I really loved it. For me, at least, teaching creative writing was going right back to my beginnings, an excuse to teach comparative literature.

The novels, the final part of your question: yes, they use my experience and in some ways they all focus on the idea of unbelonging. How do you belong when you don't belong? That's their shared theme, and their forms of unbelonging are sometimes surprising. Sometimes the foreigners have deeper roots in England than the English, feel more at home. But all my novels follow a desire which I wouldn't have known how to articulate in academic work, which is to write about London, being in London, living in London, being an East European in London, exploring that experience.

Christian Voß: Let's continue in this direction with your more recent fictional writing. Let's intertwine it with the core topic of "Ruritania" which is perceptions. In Monsieur Ka you transpose your Serbian arrival in London in the 1980s into the 1940s, and the heroine is a French Jew who meets her British husband in Alexandria. The novel thrives on intertextuality. On the one hand, the story of Anna Karenina is told, by her son and her grandson and great-grandson, who end up in London. Further intertextual references are Flaubert's Madame Bovary and Chekhov's "Lady with a Dog" – in all three cases it is about adultery of the heroines. You achieve the greatest intertextuality, however, as you write yourself in the epilogue, with a homage to Miloš Crnjanski's hero from "The Novel of London" from 1971, whom the heroine meets briefly on the bus. Maybe I can use these literary cross-references and ask where you locate yourself or how you are classified. Do you write British literature, or European or still Serbian, or do such labels make no sense?

Vesna Goldsworthy: I could simply say such labels don't make sense and finish with the question because it is impossible to classify myself very easily. When I go to Serbia, I'm introduced as a British writer. I opened the Book Fair in Belgrade in 2005 when Britain was Guest of Honour as the representative of Britain and as a British writer. Then, giving interviews to mark the occasion, the British journalists would ask me: "As a Serbian writer, what do you think?". I am like those Russian dolls: you open one to find another.

And often what happens is that the British Council, or another British body, sends me on a tour in Europe to present my work, as one of new British voices, yet when we get there we have press conferences and all the journalists ask me about the situation in Serbia or Montenegro. It's difficult to know where to place myself meaningfully. There are lots of writers exactly like me who don't belong to one place or another. I do belong to the English language because I write in English, but you can't study my work only in that context.

As if to prove this point, you ask a great question related to Crnjanski and intertextual references. In its review of "Monsieur Ka" written by a Russian-American novelist, the Los Angeles Review of Books compares the novel to a delightful jigsaw puzzle. The true lovers of Tolstoy's work will hunt for clues sprinkled throughout "Monsieur Ka" with such care that finding yet another reference never fails to be rewarding. But what very few Western, or in-

deed Russian, readers will spot, is a whole host of hidden references to Crnjanski's "Novel of London".

Our novels are set in the same period. Prince Rjepnin, Crnjanski's main character, appears unnamed as a passenger on a London bus. A Serbian reader would recognise his characteristic physical description, but for an English reader that description is meaningless. The most difficult thing writing "Monsieur Ka" was reconstructing the English language from 1947, particularly English as spoken by East European immigrants in London at that particular time. By writing in English I'm already making my life difficult. But by writing in historic English I'm making it even harder. You suddenly find that particular words you need weren't yet in use. "Ghostwriter" is one such word: it wasn't commonly used in 1947. I had a discussion about it with my editor. Is it plausible, could I use it or not? At the level of language writing this novel was a difficult task, much harder than writing my earlier books. Such is the madness that academics suffer from when they want to employ all their scholarly training to write novels.

Belfjore Qose: You know, in cinema it's not like this. On Netflix they change the language to nowadays English, and I'm surprised by what I see sometimes.

Vesna Goldsworthy: In one of our discussions, my editor gave up trying to persuade me and said "If you include that word in your novel the Oxford English Dictionary will have it next year and put you as a reference." I'm now making the English language myself! (laughs)

Perceptions of Yugoslavia and "Eastern Europe"

Belfjore Qose: I'd like to go on with "Chernobyl Strawberries". The classic interest towards literature and memoirs beyond the Iron Curtain has changed with time. During and after the fall of communist regimes the western reader was fed with literature coming from big dissident writers, with strong political statements, that showed the extent of the courage it took to fight the alienation, to keep your personal ideas uncorrupted, to preserve spirituality and religion, or to merely live according to your true self, narratives we find in the opus of Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Miłosz, Trebeshina and even Kundera, although many times in his interviews Kundera rejected labeling his novels as "dissident", but aimed to be considered as a non-political writer. This classic list from the Post-Communist countries has silently changed and has been enriched with books that tend to explore life during the communist era from multiple angles, such as in Alexievich's works such as "Second Hand Life", in Gospodinov's "I lived in Socialism" and here I am adding also "Chernobyl Strawberries", on which you at the very beginning clarify the reason of writing this memoir, which is personal and touching, but through which we can also assume you were not even imagining the success this work would have and how it would impact the idea on how life was during Yugoslavia on western readers. Why do you think this interest changed from big dissidents, prison literature, to everyday life and common people or characters? What are the other reasons besides the overfed book industry with the same big names?

Vesna Goldsworthy: It's a challenging question. I think there is a move away from grand narratives and grand figures not just within the book industry but in the society as a whole. Those grand dissident figures are replaced by ordinary voices. This is a major shift of interest, including political interest, but when I wrote "Chernobyl Strawberries" I didn't foresee that. My book wasn't opportunistic: I wouldn't know how to be. If I could predict what the readers' interest would be I'd be a wealthy woman! If someone had told me that the book would have a quarter of a million readers when you add up the number of copies sold

across the world, I would have been very surprised, in fact precisely because I saw my life as ordinary. I really didn't think when I was writing "Chernobyl Strawberries" that there was anything particularly exciting or exceptional about my life. I thought I was – I still am – an ordinary person. However, that wasn't how the book was perceived. My English readers, or my German readers, think that I have an unusual life. And in some ways perhaps an exotic life. I depict life in Tito's Yugoslavia and in some ways although still relatively young, I was already a museum piece. My memoir depicts a world that had vanished as much as the world that Nabokov described. Then there is also that kind of desire for literary production to cover different parts of the world, different experiences. In 2005, mine was the first memoir from the former Yugoslavia that was covering that part of the world in an ordinary, everyday context, not as a story of war: there were already too many war stories from that region. You talk about "overfed" book industry with a touch of deserved irony I think.

Christian Voß: For me, "Monsieur Ka" has a hero and a theme: the hero is London – the invincible metropolis that has withstood Hitler's Blitzkrieg and is the destination of diverse migration – you call it the "chameleon quality of London". We are in the year 1947. The real topic for me is the acculturation process of the French Albertine and the Russian Karenin family in London – cultural and especially linguistic perceptions of foreignness and adaptation, but also hybrid identity – at one point the migrants are called "tuppenny Munchausens", i. e. cheap-liar barons who come up with new names and false identities. And – be careful, here comes a spoiler – it is also this shared experience of being a stranger and staying stranger that ultimately turns Anna Karenina's grandson and the heroine into lovers. Are you writing about your own experience of acculturation and un-belonging in England?

Vesna Goldsworthy: There is a history of British immigration that is implicit in the novel and it predates our global world. You will perhaps remember examples of famous immigrant narratives which then turn out, in their mother country, to have been received completely differently. In the past, before the era of the internet and mass travel, immigrants were in some ways freer to reinvent themselves, for better or worse.

One thing that you get in "Monsieur Ka" is this idea that you never know what is real and what is invented in terms of identity. There I am, this "English" novelist writing a novel about Russians who have taken English names and appear to be very English but in fact they have these hidden histories and no one is quite sure what is appearance and what reality. So Albertine, my French narrator (who is in fact Jewish and no longer loves France), goes to a party and sees all these English people, she's really intimidated by them. But when she starts speaking to them, everyone turns out to be something other than they claim to be.

This is the history of immigration in mid-20th century, Europe on the move, literally millions, people restarting, creating new lives, belonging and not belonging. And paradoxically, in the novel, the one person who absolutely doesn't belong is the British army officer, the central male character. He had grown up in India and he's miserable in London. The climate is awful, the city's full of foreigners, he doesn't know quite where to align himself. He keeps going to Germany but Germany has its own problems and he feels miserable there too, unable to help. The whole world of "Monsieur Ka" is a world of dislocation, no one is quite fixed in that novel. And that was the beautiful thing of writing it. I created a world where any fixed reality is endlessly undermined by these reinventions.

Belfjore Qose: Vesna, space and the decline of Yugoslavia: in your memoir you mention that little things indicate the decay of a system. These are little things for the observer, but not for the individual whose life is made up from these little things. We would rhetorically ask how little are these things in fact? I would focus on how space spoke for deeper

things going on. In Albanian Social Realism there is a typical narrative of a family that is sent to apartments newly built in a still under construction zone which is a muddy, noisy periphery, but who learn to adapt and live happily although they are displaced unwillingly. The same space of a periphery that is being built with ugly prefabricated apartment buildings is depicted as a symbol of human alienation and as life after the death of the tradition – after my interpretation of course – in Martin Camaj, another subversive Albanian writer. It's the same city space that different perspectives depicted in opposite ways. In your case, there is a very captivating moment where you analyse that “the very essence of the East European condition is that your housing and your family were never quite in sync”. How could you “smell” the decay of Yugoslavia from these little things, such as space, house space, city space etc.?

Vesna Goldsworthy: Space in general and city space in particular mark my work very profoundly. Christian said that the three novels that I've written are all about London in different ways while the memoir is about Belgrade: both big cities inhabited by millions. The idea urban space is something that preoccupies me. But what you're asking is something different, more complex perhaps, the space of habitation. You are asking how our life histories map themselves in spaces of habitation.

The street where I used to live in Belgrade is now full of huge empty houses because so many people have emigrated and left their elderly parents to live alone in enormous echoing spaces that were built in the 1970s and 1980s for big families. This is my family trajectory, my own life: we lived in a tiny flat in what was a beautiful, green part of Belgrade. My parents, so as to create accommodation for the next generation, sold that tiny place in order to build a huge ugly house on the edge of town because then that new house could have three flats. One for me, one for my sister, one for them. It was a mini skyscraper of a kind that you find everywhere in the Balkans. My sister and I hated that new house. We emigrated, and the house is now empty. It is symbolic, for me, this idea that the tiny place where we lived happily in the 1960s wasn't enough, and that the excessive new space created through parental sacrifice is then abandoned. All of us in the Balkans have huge diasporic communities.

What I'm interested in this story is also the paradoxical working of nostalgia, of homesickness, this idea of feeling homesick for something that you don't like or have never really liked because it triggers memories of an earlier life. So this particular house which I dislike is also the site of my homesickness and nostalgia. Its emptiness marks for me a degree of pain: I don't want to inhabit it but I still miss it. There's a paradox here that I think only people from the Balkans would recognise.

There is also the reverse paradox in the Gastarbeiter communities who go back to their place of origin and build similarly huge and ugly houses that ruin Balkan landscapes and that they will never inhabit because they're investing in some kind of projected life. You find entire villages across the Balkans with huge empty houses built by money from Switzerland or Germany, the houses that no one will ever live in.

Christian Voß: My last question brings me back to your Serbian identity. I never wanted to essentialise you in your Serbianness, Vesna, it's only that our sponsor doesn't allow us to invite British writers but only Balkan writers! So my question: as can be heard in “Monsieur Ka”, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina's lover, the officer Vronskij, died in the Serbian-Ottoman war in the 1880s. Otherwise your own Yugoslav and Serbian childhood and youth is largely lost in your fictional work. And your recently announced book “Iron Curtain” also aims at the block contrast after 1945 and Great Britain during the Cold War. Are you simply following the expectations of the British audience, you mentioned this commercial aspect, or when can we expect a novel set in the Balkans or even in Serbia?

Vesna Goldsworthy: I promised myself that I would one day write a book in Serbian just to see whether I've forgotten my mother tongue or whether it has forgotten me. The language changes so much. To answer your question: I don't write with that kind of design or, if you want, opportunism. I am not sure what the expectations of the British audience really are in my case. There is also the issue of authenticity, now raised so often: could I really write about Serbia any longer?

Let me tell you an anecdote from fifteen years ago. "Chernobyl Strawberries" was doing so very well, and I remember my then agent talking about the book that I was going to write next. She was discussing it with an American publisher. She said to me, passing his advice: "I hope you're not going to write another book set in Serbia." "Why not?" I asked, and she explained. "You've done Serbia already; you don't want to be typecast." That is the logic of publishing: you've covered this theme, move on. But that is only because I come from a small country and one book about it seems like enough. They wouldn't say to Salman Rushdie: "You've done India already, no more India, now write about a different place."

The paradox here is that coming from a small place gives you certain privileged insider knowledge but for a writer this can also be a burden. Everyone from that small place looks at your writing with a magnifying glass. So, just as Crnjanski used the Russians for his story of emigration, I used the Russians too. Funnily enough it wasn't in reaction to my agent's advice. I wanted to explore London without getting into the Serbia vs England debate, or the nitty-gritty of Serbian contemporary positioning. The Russians were for me, as for Crnjanski, a freeing mechanism. I could write about a community that I don't belong to, in order to say certain truths about London. It was a strategic decision, rather than a choice to escape my own identity or to embrace it.

In a way, I would rather like to write a novel about former Yugoslavia, about Belgrade, about Serbia, in Serbian, but that is not likely to happen for as long as I have to live off my writing. If you write in any of the languages of the former Yugoslavia you sell 2.000–3.000 copies. You can tell that I'm a Marxist: I am implying that the base, the mode of publishing production dictates the super-structure which, in this case, is the novel I write. So long as I have my publishers and my agents waiting for me to deliver a book, I'm committed to writing in English and there's no time off for fancy literary ideas that I might have about writing in a small language, even if it's my own.

Belfjore Qose: Does it have anything to do with feeling relieved or having more freedom in a foreign language? For example, I can remember an Albanian writer, Ornella Vorpsi, who said in one of her interviews that she kept writing in Italian, then in French but not in Albanian because her childhood in Tirana was very traumatic. And she felt a sense of freedom and relief while writing in a foreign language.

Vesna Goldsworthy: Not in my case. I think that freedom is an illusion that only lasts until the book is published. When "Chernobyl Strawberries" was published in Britain my post-bag was bursting with letters from former Yugoslavia where people were putting me to rights on this and that: "Why did you say x or why did you say y?". There is no freedom in escape, your audience is absolutely global. If Ornella Vorpsi had that idea about Albania, that may have been the case for her first book but the moment that book is published you realise that everything nowadays is global and local at the same time.

There is a different, perhaps better, question which has to do with writing in a new language in order to free a new kind of creativity. I realised, for example, writing about my own life, that I have more inhibitions in Serbian than I have in English. I am not talking about themes but about words. I would like to use the example of swear-words, but I can't because we are being recorded. In English I can swear like a trooper without feeling embarrassed. In Serbian I can't. W. H. Auden said something like this: that in your mother tongue words have greater reality. When the child learns the word *moon* it sees the moon, yes?

Whereas in your acquired language those connections are weaker, words are more abstract.

So if I think of intimate body parts in English I can name them all in public, but in Serbian my childhood inhibition cuts in. There is a different attitude towards the texture of language itself. It sounds funny, but I didn't realise this thing about cursing and swear-words until I started driving my son in London. I would habitually swear in English at other drivers – windows closed, of course – just to vent my anger. Having a little boy in the car I suddenly realised that the verb beginning with f is just as real in English as it is in Serbian. This is not an academic point. You have fewer taboos in an acquired language than you have in your first language. But it's not about escaping the audience or politics, as that Vorpsi quote implies, it's really to do with the words themselves, the writer and his or her tools.