



A review of
**Serbian
Fairy Tales**

Joanna Coleman

From hovering castles to golden trees, enchanted peahens to serpent children, sons of bears and rams of gold, Jelena Curcic's collection takes us on a remarkable journey across the Balkans. Lakes teem with Aždajas (demon-dragons), mountains with Vilas (nymphs of enchantment) and horses guide the way to dark realms of precious stone. The characters we meet are brought to life by Rosanna Morris's enchanting illustrations, combining sketching with watercolour to echo the style of the telling; of real beings enduring real lives in real places – but with magic bursting from all the edges of their world.

Many of these tales appear here in English for the first time. The tales and motifs vary from the familiar to the unknown, yet even those which sound like stories we know and love are thoroughly unexpected. The trials of Pepljuga, the Serbian Cinderella, begin when she inadvertently changes her mother into a cow by dropping her spindle. A young bride wears out iron shoes looking for the snake husband she has lost, as only then can she give birth to her child. A tiny man the size of a peppercorn wrestles golden apples from a mighty Aždaja; a golden-fleeced ram is pursued in an enchanted forest, and an unfortunate Tzar tries to conceal his goat ears from his barber, who whispers his secret to the very earth itself. Some characters, of course, are those that English folklore has never met, such as an old woman who sits on a pile of rocks embracing a beautiful bird, her tresses of golden hair flowing down her crumbling tower. If she sees you she will turn you to stone, but if you can take hold of her hair and force her to release the bird she carries, you will be the happiest person in the world ('The Bird Maiden').

These stories are a selection from the fairy tales originally collected by Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, a philologist and a linguist who reformed the Serbian language, standardised the alphabet, and adventured through the Balkans collecting, as Curcic puts it, 'poems and songs, folk tales, fables and fairy tales, customs, riddles and proverbs' (x). Curcic's selection of twenty, published as part of the Serbian Fairy Tales Project, is also a book that refuses to separate story, language, and culture. Though the language may be translated, the beings are not. Instead of the generic 'dragon' we are told of Aždajas and

Zmaj; Aždajas being fully demonic, while the more ambiguous Zmaj may, like the ferocious Baba Yaga, be seen as demons, protectors or ancestral guardians, created, legend has it, from a fiery ball which rises once a year from a lake in a certain village and bursts into pieces of dragonish flame. Instead of fairies, this is a world of Vilas, shapeshifting nymphs of beautiful enchantment who also happen to be 'fierce warriors' (2). As well as an appendix on the Serbian alphabet, the book contains detailed notes explaining cultural references, such as the concept of 'Brother/Sister-with-God', the custom 'whereby a person could name another their brother or sister, as a mark of deep friendship and loyalty' (xvi), thoroughly useful when it inspires a Zmaj-mother to adopt you instead of having her sons tear you to pieces, as in 'The Seven Little Vlachs'.

Like the lands from which they were born, these stories contain within them a diverse mix of cultures, faiths and stories; Tsars and forest witches, Sultans, genies, magic carpets and mill-demons. Ancient Greek motifs jostle with Turkish enchantment and Slavic magic amidst the caves, valleys and mountains of the Balkans, the beauty of which is symbolised in the wonders that occur. Old deity traces, as Curcic suggests, remain vivid in supernatural encounters, such as with the first story, 'The Maiden Who Was Faster Than a Horse', in which a woman, made by Vilas out of snow gathered from a bottomless pit, challenges all men in the world to a race for her hand. Although they go on horseback and she on foot, they cannot catch her. A Tsar's son calls her in the name of God to stop and she does, yet when he catches her and returns home, he turns round to find her vanished in the saddle. As this story suggests, the word of God may be the most powerful force of speech, yet other forces of enchantment continue thoroughly undaunted. In 'Vila's Mountain' a man who saves another from the gallows is taken by him to the mountain of the Vilas, where he marries one of them, has a family and lives happily. Only when elderly does he feel 'remorseful for his sins' and returns home to his old father and the church. After that, Curcic tells us, 'he lived like a true Christian until he died. Except once every Summer, when he went back to the Vila's mountain to see his company' (76).

Curcic is both a storyteller and a writer. Her project, supported by Arts Council England and the Serbian Council of Great Britain, includes the book as well as a series of adult storytelling performances and workshops for children, which will continue in 2015 across England and Europe. Curcic's relationship with the tales is clearly a living one. In translating these tales she has kept them as close as she could imagine to the original oral stories, resisting an attempt to make them 'into literary creations' (xv). The result is a collection of stories which read at times awkwardly, at times as thoroughly bizarre, but breathing stories with motifs, images and plots which arrest the mind and capture the imagination. In the tantalising glimpse of her performances available online, a Tilt Spoken Word production on YouTube,¹ Curcic embeds the stories she is about to tell in her own relationship with her grandmother, and her grandmother's stories of

the village, its people, and the man she loved, Curcic's own grandfather, scything a field at the height of summer. Curcic's book opens the door to the world of Serbian fairy tales with a deep respect to oral telling. To be guided within its wonderland, the enchanted reader almost has a responsibility to seek out Curcic and hear her tell. I certainly will.

Author: Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic. Editor/translator: Jelena Curcic.
Flying Fish Publications (2013), 156pp.

Joanna Coleman

References

1. 'Jelena Curcic extracts from her book *Serbian Fairy Tales*', Tilt Spokenwd, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqDvSUUyjpU>, accessed 22 March 2015.



A review of **Five Wounds:** **An Illuminated Novel**

Robin Furth

As soon as I heard about Jonathan Walker and Dan Hallett's illuminated novel, *Five Wounds*, I was eager to read it. As a comic book writer, I am fascinated by sequential art and by verbal-visual collaborations. I am also a great fan of the gothic fairy-tale tradition, which (according to the reviews I'd read) was exactly what this novel drew upon.

According to Walker, *Five Wounds* was inspired in equal parts by William Blake, Italo Calvino, Terry Gilliam, Francisco Goya, Jeanette Winterson, and Marvel's Uncanny X-Men. The novel is composed of five interlocking tales that take place in a surreal, dream version of 19th-century Venice. Part dystopian novel and part black comedy, it introduces us to a world where dogs display human ambition and angels are born into human families only to have their wings amputated because they are considered a dynastic liability. The narrative

focuses on the intertwined destinies of five orphans, all of whom are (in one way or another) social outcasts. The first character we meet is Cur, a man kidnapped and then raised by the city's guild of canine assassins. Next is Crow, a sadistic, scheming, and leprous apothecary-cum-chemist who is trying to distil an antidote to death and who dreams of becoming the city's sole ruler. Third is Gabriella, an angel whose wings have been amputated and so receives incomplete visions from a divine source she does not trust. Fourth is Cuckoo, a gambler born with a putty-like face that he constantly moulds into others' likenesses, and fifth is Magpie, a photosensitive daguerreotypist who loves shiny objects and is subject to bouts of kleptomania.

Erudite, gruesome, and self-consciously postmodern (the text is set out in the chapter and verse style of the King James Bible and includes quotes from other works as well as crossed-out words, handwritten corrections, and two possible endings), *Five Wounds* is not a novel for the squeamish or fainthearted. However, for those with a liking for horror, word play, and intellectual puzzles, it makes for fascinating reading.

As a physical object, *Five Wounds* is a beautiful book. Luxuriously bound with a faux-leather cover, a gilded palmistry symbol on the front, heraldic emblems on the spine, 18 central plates, and a red ribbon page marker, it is a pleasure to hold and to leaf through. But beautiful as the book is, I would class it as an illustrated novel, not an illuminated book. When I think of illuminated books, my mind immediately turns to medieval manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells, as well as William Blake's gorgeous hand-printed and hand-coloured pages. I also think of the contemporary illuminated manuscripts created by artist/calligraphers such as Nancy Ruth Leavitt. In Walker's book there are wonderful black-and-white illustrations and beautiful bookplates, but these illustrations are not the same as illumination, where the entire page comes alive as a unified whole. The illumination inherent in Walker and Hallett's collaboration seems more conceptual and intellectual than visual.

On his website, Walker justifies calling his book an illuminated novel because illustrated books are 'created by isolated individuals who never communicate with each other', as opposed to his own book in which 'the text, the design and illustrations are not separate elements' and where 'every layout has been conceived as an integrated whole and executed collaboratively'. As someone who has worked with illustrated books and comics for more than a decade, I feel that Walker's dismissal of the rich and vibrant history of the illustrated book gives this amazing tradition short shrift. Artists and writers as varied as Max Ernst and Alastair Gray have created amazingly diverse and groundbreaking illustrated books. Even within the comics industry, the most distinctive stories are intensely collaborative efforts, where artists, writers, and editors work together to create something unique and magical. Many are also hand-lettered, and the fonts are specifically chosen to reflect the various moods of a piece. In both comics and illustrated books, there are many writer/artist teams that have worked together for decades, and there are hundreds of writer-artists who illustrate, letter, and produce their own books (Emily Carroll's *Through the Woods*, published by Faber, is an

excellent recent example, as is Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland*). The book arts scene (of which my husband is a part) is a whole world unto itself. Here, many handmade, finely crafted, hand-lettered or hand-printed books are proudly called 'illustrated books' by their makers.

My reaction to *Five Wounds* as a parable/fairy tale and as a piece of creative fiction is mixed. I enjoyed the story's inventiveness, but at times I felt that the narrative's forward momentum was slowed by its self-conscious complexity and erudite asides about subjects as diverse as the nature of symbols and language and the traditional recipes for paint pigments. The characters had pulse and life force, but I couldn't help but feel at times that the novel's true heart and inspiration were purposefully obscured. This instinct was borne out by some information shared on Walker's website. In the section marked 'The Art of Grief', Walker states that *Five Wounds* has an 'invisible, suppressed source' which is actually a key to understanding the novel. That source is an unpublished autobiographical work entitled 'The Art of Grief', which describes the overwhelming pain and anger he felt after the death of his estranged, alcoholic father, a loss that must have been twice as difficult since Walker's mother committed suicide when he was an adolescent.

Walker considered 'The Art of Grief' to be a 'comprehensive failure' and so transformed its raw emotion and startling stories into the coded and much more controlled tale recounted in *Five Wounds*. *Five Wounds* contains quotes from 'The Art of Grief', but as Walker says himself, they are 'safely hidden away, like bones in a reliquary'. In *Five Wounds*, autobiography is transformed into fiction. Walker felt that his father loved his dogs more than he loved his son, so he created Cur, a rabid man who was raised by dogs. Walker's mother committed suicide and his father's corpse – undiscovered for five days – was partially eaten by his famished canines, and so two of the corpses that Crow collects to distil the essence of death are a woman who has committed suicide and a man whose face has been eaten by animals. Magpie, the daguerreotypist and collector, is fascinated by this couple and lovingly photographs them.

It seems to me that Walker's truly stunning breakthrough novel (or perhaps graphic novel) remains to be written. Perhaps his own wounds are too raw for him to gaze directly at the personal stigmata which are his true inspiration. If Walker can take the power of 'The Art of Grief' and transform it directly into fairy-tale fiction or surreal graphic fiction – something that does not hide behind its own erudition – it will be an amazing book indeed.

Author: Jonathan Walker. Illustrator: Dan Hallett.
Allen & Unwin (2010), 204pp.

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