

A Conversation with Katja Rudolph, author of

*LITTLE BASTARDS IN SPRINGTIME*

A Novel

Published by Steerforth Press

April 6, 2015

Distributed by Penguin Random House

***Where did the story of Jevrem come from? You write about a very specific historical moment and place in depicting Sarajevo and the Bosnian civil war of the early 90s. What is your relationship to them?***

When I completed the manuscript I asked Goran Simic, a Bosnian-Canadian poet who lived through the Siege of Sarajevo and divides his time between Toronto and Sarajevo, to read the book and tell me if it felt authentic to him. He read it and loved it and asked me whether I'd lived through the siege myself. I guess my name is ethnic in a way that might lead people to think I myself come from Sarajevo. But this is not the case. I have no connection to this historical moment or to Sarajevo but through the characters who landed in my imagination one day — it felt that sudden — and stayed there until I finished writing the book. I write entirely from character. The characters visit me — that's how it feels, like a visitation — and they determine the where and what of time, event, place. I discover the where and what as I find out who they are through writing.

I approach writing in much the same way that I approach reading (and I am first and foremost a reader: it's what I love to do most in the world): with the yearning to be transported. I want to see and experience and feel much more than my own life can offer. I think this is true of all avid readers. Given limited material resources — and the constraints of travel in space and time — the imagination is a powerful tool to experience many lives in one lifetime, many places, contexts, circumstances, identities, time-periods. This is a truism, of course, and possibly a somewhat trite point, but it gets to the most basic reason why I write: I, like many introverts — counter-intuitively — want always to see *out* and see *beyond* — to be left alone to see out and beyond. There is hardly a moment in my life that I'm not reading something — while eating lunch — or listening to the radio — while doing the dishes. I love to go on the trip of the story, always, because the story is the fuel of the imagination and the imagination transports us out and beyond the insularity of our everyday lives.

I feel that I use my imagination in much the same way that scientists use robotic exploration rovers to explore the places that humans can't physically get to: the moon, the deep ocean, under the wreckage of a building. I cannot physically/experientially get to all the places I'm interested in, but my imagination can, which, with training in the kinds of research I need to conduct to "get it right," can take me deep into another person's psyche, give me a fly's eye perspective of a private space, offer a breath-taking bird's eye view of city and countryside, take me way out into the cosmos, shuttle me "back and forth" in time. My relationship to that which is foreign becomes intimate and detailed: there are few boundaries that restrict where the imagination can go, and I am always led by the nose by my characters.

***How did you approach researching this novel? Did you visit Sarajevo? How do you orient yourself to the problem of "getting it right" when you're fictionalizing a historical event and depicting a psychological state and sociological phenomena?***

I don't research a novel in the same way that I'd research to write an academic monograph. Research for a novel does not need to be systematic or exhaustive since novel-writing is not about yielding generalizations that can hold up under rigorous social-scientific scrutiny. Novel-writing is about paying attention to the singular, and paying attention to the singular requires a different kind of research than does harnessing sources to shore up a general claim. But having said that, I did a lot of general reading about Yugoslav history, the civil war of the 1990s, theories about the cause of its dissolution, of which there are many, as well as into PTSS in youth, the presentation of violence in PTSS-suffering war-survivors, "juvenile delinquency," juvenile detention, the experience of refugees in Canada, particularly young refugees. After I get a sense of the broad strokes, I research on a need-to-know basis: that is, when I come to a particular scene, my characters show me what I need to know, and I find it out as I write.

I did not visit Sarajevo. I would love to visit Sarajevo because it's a remarkable place and I love to travel. But I don't think visiting is necessary to meet the demands of verisimilitude, and it can be an obstacle. The truth is, I can never be there as anything other than a tourist, and I can never personally see and experience the place but through the filter of my own expectations as a visitor, my personal likes and dislikes, how I happen to feel and who I happen to meet and what I happen to eat the week that I'm visiting. I would only ever experience the city in its host guise. And, of course, visiting Sarajevo now doesn't take me to Sarajevo under siege twenty years ago. I think a more accurate way to describe and conjure a place is to read many accounts by actual residents of that place and time. Reading these accounts gives one a sense of the commonalities of living there, what it feels like to be a resident, as well as the vast range of experiences that living in one place can offer. Each account amplifies and qualifies/corrects the previous account and comes far closer to what my characters would see, think, feel, and experience than my personal response to a place could ever do.

***How was it that you felt confident enough to write in the voice of a teenage boy, considering that you are neither a teenager nor a boy?***

It's the rover of my imagination, again. And the fact that I sometimes feel that I'm a teenage boy trapped in an adult woman's body. That is, inasmuch as one can generalize about the experience of being a teenage boy (which one really shouldn't), I resonate with the quality of energy of the teenage boys I experience around me. That is, roiling with pent-up drives, sexual and otherwise; yearning to be free and self-sufficient; feeling constrained by the prissiness and pettiness of domestic life; calling out the hypocrisies and lameness of the adults around them; time relentlessly making fun of them; the irrepressible urge to yell "fuck you" and "fuck that" to the many ludicrous injunctions and taken-for-granted absurdities of everyday life. So Jevrem's voice does not feel alien to me in any way. I get his rage at and his disappointment in the adults around him and the international world for allowing such a horrendous war to continue for so long. I have a sense that teenage-hood for boys is a time of life when it's possible to be most honest. I say for boys because girls are universally gendered very differently and have a different and possibly more complex way of navigating their emotions and the social spaces they find themselves in.

***How do you justify the gang violence you describe in the book? Thousands of former Yugoslavians immigrated to North America, bearing the scars of that war, who are good law-abiding citizens, and not IN ANY WAY delinquents.***

It felt plausible to me that Jevrem, my teenage protagonist, being who he is in temperament and personality, having lived through the longest siege of a city in recorded history at the age he did, living with the devastating consequences of war on his family, would become a juvenile delinquent with a socially destructive or anti-social sense of his place in society and the place of violence in that society. That is, his character and story to me show imminent coherence, and that's all that really interests me as writer of novels. Fiction's power and scope lies precisely in its license to explore emotions and actions on the level of conjecture and extrapolation, all covered by the evident fact of singularity (individuals everywhere are unique) and tested by an imminent emotional and circumstantial logic. Fiction writers do not generally bind themselves to representing the statistical norm in an attempt to provide a sociologically accurate representation of average experience or behaviour. In fact, they often deal with what is statistically anomalous: the exception to the rule, the unusual, unexpected, the extreme extrapolation of human experience/behaviour and real world scenarios. In this way fiction is able to freely explore the bounds of "the human condition," however that is construed. There is one of everything and everyone under the sun, or there easily could be, and that's all fiction needs to know about the world to proceed.

Having said this, there are accounts in Canada of gangs of South Asian and Somali boys, for instance, who are working out the trauma of their childhood experiences as immigrants, refugees, visible minorities, and war survivors in similar ways as Jevrem and his gang do. And worldwide, gangs made up of refugees from the former Yugoslavia exist.

I researched PTSS and its relationship to violent behaviour to make sure my representation was plausible and found that traumatized youth, as well as returning veterans, can exhibit extreme violent behaviour, and, more prevalently, extreme violent fantasies. Are Jevrem and his gang in actuality as violent as he presents them to be? Jevrem is a compulsive liar. How reliable is his voice, his storytelling? Do the home invasions really go down the way he tells them? Is it possible that he did go with his gang to Andrew's house but only yelled at Andrew on his front step, that the rest was another instance of the violent fantasies that both torment Jevrem and satisfy a compulsive need to assert his control over any confrontational situation, thereby relieving his feelings of powerlessness and humiliation as a refugee in a struggling refugee family? Research shows that feelings of powerlessness, humiliation, and lack of control in young men, especially (due to prevailing gendering pressures), whether caused by poverty, racism, war or other trauma, refugee status, can (though won't necessarily) lead to a number of concerning symptoms, including deep depression, violent fantasies, anti-social activity of various kinds, petty crime, gang membership, major crime, etc. As in some of these cases, Jevrem has become the perpetrator, even if only in his own mind, so he won't be the victim any longer.

Aisha, Jevrem's sister, also embodies a plausible and documented response to the trauma of war. She is a model student and an extreme over-achiever.

***How would you describe the main theme of book, if you had to identify one?***

I encountered Jevrem first by feeling the force of his anger. The first scenes that I wrote were of him and his gang on a rampage in Toronto, breaking and entering and generally behaving badly. I was interested in him as a perpetrator. But then I discovered his history. The criminality in him is a function of his loss of faith in "the good" at a very young age. As ever, his behavior as a perpetrator is fueled by the trauma of his victimhood. He is, like a lot of teenagers, a fierce moralist who feels betrayed and disheartened. So the thread that I see running through this book is Jevrem's emotional response to his deep sense of disappointment in the world around him. *Hypocrites, all of you!* This is his judgment of the world, and it is this judgment that he is able to slowly qualify as he journeys toward some indefinite destination — literal and figurative — that offers hope.

***The second section of the book is set in your hometown of Toronto. Why did you set it there? What kind of decisions does one make as an author in representing the place where one lives, given that there are hundreds of ways of accurately describing a city?***

I don't feel that I chose to set this book, or my subsequent two books, in Toronto. The characters just somehow gravitate to this place — where I no longer live, but did live for twenty years. I am not concerned about representing Toronto in and of itself; my characters live in the city in a certain way and that's the city that I write. Jevrem's Toronto is quite different than my Toronto. He lives in a low-income, shabby area and his state of mind is such that it's a bleak place for him; the season, springtime, adds to the bleakness. Compared to the old-world charm of Sarajevo, Toronto is an ugly place for Jevrem, and the fact that he and his family are here as refugees and did not leave their home by choice makes his relationship to his new city fraught and conflicted. I have much sunnier memories of my time in Toronto.

Toronto is one of the most successfully diverse cities in the world. This is a relatively new phenomenon in its history. Toronto of the '50s and '60s was a notoriously stodgy, uptight, and WASPy. Now many Torontonians are non-Anglo, non-white and from somewhere else; the city contains millions of stories of arrival and adaptation and settling in. This makes it an interesting context for a novel. It is the home to many still-living cultures, and while racism and poverty exist, the celebration of diversity is part of the city's explicit identity. Toronto is not afflicted with the racialized inner-city poverty of many US cities, which seems to foreign eyes to be structurally entrenched, so the stories set within it can realistically be nuanced and varied accounts of attempts at belonging. Toronto offers endless possibilities, with few insurmountable obstacles — like race — for how to live in a city.

***You clearly love the open road. There is a feeling of exhilaration and possibility when Jevrem escapes juvie and hitchhikes west, even though he's in many ways at his most desperate. Why did you have him go on the run like this?***

My favorite form of travel is the road trip, and my favorite place to do it is through North America. All my road-trips have been spiritually cathartic and peaceful and have connected me to nature in a way no other kind of trip did — simply because so much of Canada and even the States is wilderness or relatively unpopulated countryside and it takes so long to get anywhere. You have to sit back and be patient and relax into the rhythm of the journey.

My editors at HarperCollins asked for there to be a redemptive and hopeful element to Jevrem's story — the original manuscript is far darker than the book — and the only way I could see bringing this into the narrative arc in a way that was true to Jevrem's psychological state was to have him literally break free from his past and physically undertake the journey that he's also figuratively on: toward a destination that potentially offers something whole to believe in again. A road trip across the continent, especially hitch-hiking, is bad-ass, and therefore in keeping with Jevrem's bad-ass energy, and offers him all the time and opportunity to find a meditative and reflective orientation to his past, as well as to open up to what is around him. On the run, on the

move, he is at once freer and more empowered than he's ever been, and also more vulnerable and dependent on others. This felt like the perfect emotional tension to propel Jevrem out of his misery into a new way of understanding himself and his past.

***Several characters that Jevrem meets during his road-trip have a fairy-tale-like quality to them. They seem to understand and accept him, and are generous and kind and have certain truths to teach him. Do you think such characters actually exist in the world?***

These characters just appeared when I was writing the road trip. I didn't premeditate them. Jevrem is hitchhiking, so he climbs into cars and up into cabs, and there they are, waiting to interact with him. But Jevrem is so eminently teachable/suggestible in his being lost and trying to find his ground that it would be hard to contrive a character that would have no significant impact on him. I do think these characters exist everywhere in life if we open ourselves to them — that is, if we're out of our comfort zone and no longer surrounded by our own people, and if we're in urgent need of guidance, are searching for something, we find what we're looking for in total strangers, no matter what they say. Everything and everyone we encounter feels important, like a sign.

***For more information or to request an interview with the author, please contact:***  
Devin R. Wilkie | Steerforth Press | [devin@steerforth.com](mailto:devin@steerforth.com) | 603-643-4787 x3