

**Amra Šabić-El-Rayess with Laura L. Sullivan. 2020. *The Cat I Never Named. A True Story of Love, War, and Survival*, New York/London: Bloomsbury. 370 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5476-0453-1 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-5476-0455-5 (eBook), \$ 13.99/\$ 9.79**

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This novel for young adults narrates the Bosnian war from a 16-year-old girl's perspective. More precisely, it tells the story of the three-year occupation of the northern Bosnian town of Bihać until the protagonist Amra, who bears the same name as the author, is able to emigrate to the US. The topics of the novel include the haunting forlornness of the everyday life, the immiseration and the hunger in the occupied town. Unlike other contemporary Bosnian authors, such as Sara Nović with her 2015 *Girl at War*, Lana Bastašić with *Catch the Rabbit* published in 2018, or Ismet Prčić with the 2011 novel *Shards*, *Amra Šabić-El-Rayess* foregoes retrospection and complex narrative structures, instead employing a simple, chronological perspective for her young readers and only including the migration aspect in the epilogue.

The victimisation of one ethnic group seems all-pervasive. This is already evident from the young heroine's monologue in the first few pages of the novel: "Soon the Serbs will be coming for Bosnia—and there is no doubt at all how the Serbs feel about Bosnian Muslims, Bosniaks. They hate us, they think we are subhuman" (5). Amra will later fall in love with Davor whose mother is Croatian, and this love story will be a central thread running through the narrative. Nevertheless, impermeable ethnic boundaries are drawn: on the one hand, the Četniks, on the other, the Balije (a pejorative term for Bosnians). That said, the novel depicts negotiable markers of group boundaries from a teenager's perspective, markers which, interestingly, were corroborated in one of the best ethnographic descriptions of Bosnia, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way* written by Tone Bringa in 1995. One example is how female clothing is ethnically marked: "If I visit a Muslim friend, the grandmother might cover her hair with a bright scarf printed with a rose pattern. At the home of a Christian friend, the grandmother would cover her hair with a black scarf" (48).

As part of the Yugoslav experiment under Tito, a decentralist policy of empowering the smaller nations was introduced in the late 1960s. This included recognising "ethnic Muslims" in the constitution, making Muslims with a capital "M" a national group and the sixth constitutive nation of Yugoslavia. Against this

background, the evaluation of the Yugoslav educational system as “tending to keep Muslims down” (221) is more than questionable—in the book, the Serb teacher Sava provokes his students with the words: “You Muslims make me sick. Do you want to be a backward people forever?” (55). This discourse of non-recognition may hold true for the interwar period and in the form of Marxist orientalism for the first two decades under Tito, but not for the 1970s and 1980s. The only potentially Yugo-nostalgic person in the book (“We can’t meet hate with hate”, 193) is Amra’s father who is a typical representative of the new Bosnian educated elite and displays the corruption and immorality of the new rich war profiteers. However, both parents are depicted as possessing the radiant morality that we are familiar with from the positive hero in socialist realism.

The novel’s strongest theme is Bosnian nation-building and the branding of a young nation, misjudged in its modernity and secularity. This motif runs through the entire narration—it concerns dress codes as well as the etiquette of formal greetings. The notion of a “soft”, unorthodox, and syncretic, as well as modern and European Islam in Bosnia and the Balkans cannot be disputed factually, but it implies the highly problematic assumption that this does not apply to Islam more generally: “Muslim women here don’t wear hijabs. We don’t speak Arabic or recite the Qu’ran. We are Muslims of birth, of ethnicity, not religion, really. I have brown hair, fair skin, brown eyes. I probably do look like this Četnik’s sister” (4). The syncretism, if not secularity, of Bosnian Islam is repeatedly evoked: “And to think, my own Muslim family prances around braless in thin T-shirts or in skimpy bikinis at the beach! But that is the beautiful thing about Bosnian Muslims. We accept that we all express our heritage in different ways” (215); “And all this because I am a Muslim. A Muslim who never prayed, just a Muslim by birth and blood. For that I am marked” (275); “I ... say, ‘Good afternoon!’ to the man sitting behind the desk. He scowls at me and barks, ‘It’s salam alejkum or you leave’ [...]. Outside in the corridor I’m trembling with agitation. Our country is not supposed to be like that. We’re Muslims, yes, but we have always been free to personally decide the extent of our religiosity. We define ourselves as Bosnians first, Muslims second. [...] But our identity as Muslims was always flexible. The Serbs think we are all one kind of backward Muslims. This man trying to force me to be overtly religious feels like playing right into Serb propaganda” (290).

The book also addresses the role of Muslims in Western societies. One of Amra’s comments on the end of the war in 1995 was, for example: “All the same, the idea of Muslims taking more territory in Europe terrifies them. They will graciously allow us to live and have a bit of territory” (304). It is, in fact, the EU that this accusation should be aimed at, as the Muslim countries of Southeastern Europe (especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, but also Albania) clearly have the smallest chance of rapid EU accession. Anti-Western resentment and

anger about a lack of intervention are also clearly addressed in the novel (for example, in a passage where a UN commander is accidentally pelted during a snowball fight).

As a professor at Columbia University, Šabić-El-Rayess seeks to contextualise Bihać's history for US-American rather than European readers. In the epilogue, she describes a conversation with one of her daughters, remarking that her daughter's perspective on integration was a motivation for her novel: "Mom, what will happen to children like me if Muslims are rounded up in America?" (358). Šabić-El-Rayess thus instrumentalises her Bosnian background and transposes it onto US policy. This nexus between Yugoslavia and the US was already described by Samuel Huntington. In *The Hispanic Challenge* (2004), Huntington saw the threat of minorisation of white Americans by Hispanics as the trigger for the white nationalism that actually returned to politics with the ascendance of Donald Trump. Nevertheless, the comparison of Hispanics and Yugoslav Muslims, as well as what have been dubbed "WASPS" (white Anglo-Saxon protestants) and the Serbs is highly problematic. To attempt to mould an empiric case study for one's own ideological and political context is wantonness at its best. Another example of implicit politicisation is the author's interweaving of a childlike view with the official policy of remembrance of Srebrenica ("Forgive, but never forget"), when Amra asks herself in an inner monologue: "Should we forgive but never forget?" (303).

Recently, a number of graphic novels have been published that deal with World War II and the Holocaust in a way that is accessible to young adults. They tell contemporary history as family history in an innovative and experimental format: the classic Anne Frank (the *Graphic Diary* by Ari Folman and David Polonsky published in 2017), the bestselling *Heimat. A German Family Album* written by Nora Krug in 2018, or R. J. Palacio's 2019 comic *White Bird*, in which a Jewish grandmother tells the story of survival in hiding in occupied France during World War II. Šabić-El-Rayess does not achieve the analytical depth with which author and graphic artist Nora Krug traces the question of guilt in German society. However, like in Palacio's *White Bird*, she depicts the extraordinary optimism of genocide survivors who share with the young adult readership a powerful lesson on how people can excel in crisis situations when they are sustained by friends and family.