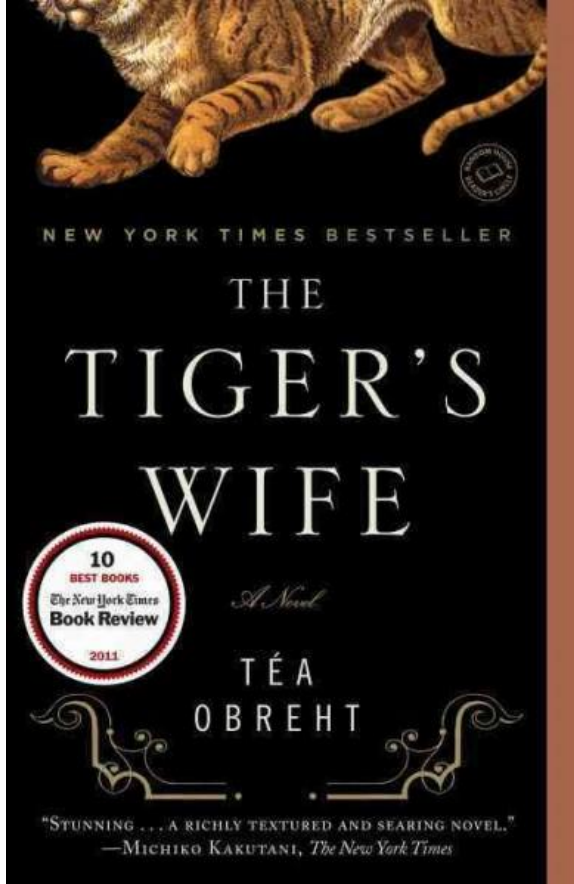


About the book...



Weaving a brilliant latticework of family legend, loss, and love, Tea Obreht, the youngest of *The New Yorker's* twenty best American fiction writers under forty, has spun a timeless novel that will establish her as one of the most vibrant, original authors of her generation.

In a Balkan country mending from years of conflict, Natalia, a young doctor, arrives on a mission of mercy at an orphanage by the sea. By the time she and her lifelong friend Zóra begin to inoculate the children there, she feels age-old superstitions and secrets gathering everywhere around her. Secrets her outwardly cheerful hosts have chosen not to tell her. Secrets involving the strange family digging for something in the surrounding vineyards. Secrets hidden in the landscape itself.

But Natalia is also confronting a private, hurtful mystery of her own: the inexplicable circumstances surrounding her beloved grandfather's recent death. After telling her grandmother that he was on his way to meet Natalia, he instead set off for a ramshackle settlement none of their family had ever heard of and died there alone. A famed physician, her grandfather must have known that he was too ill to travel. Why he left home becomes a riddle Natalia is compelled to unravel.

Grief struck and searching for clues to her grandfather's final state of mind, she turns to the stories he told her when she was a child. On their weekly trips to the zoo he would read to her from a worn copy of Rudyard Kipling's [The Jungle Book](#), which he carried with him everywhere; later, he told her stories of his own encounters over many years with "the deathless man," a vagabond who claimed to be immortal and appeared never to age.

But the most extraordinary story of all is the one her grandfather never told her, the one Natalia must discover for herself. One winter during the Second World War, his childhood village was snowbound, cut off even from the encroaching German invaders but haunted by another, fierce presence: a tiger who comes ever closer under cover of darkness. "These stories," Natalia comes to understand, "run like secret rivers through all the other

stories" of her grandfather's life. And it is ultimately within these rich, luminous narratives that she will find the answer she is looking for.

About the author...



Téa Obreht was born in 1985 in the former Yugoslavia and raised in Belgrade. In 1992 her family moved to Cyprus and then to Egypt, where she learned to speak and read English, eventually immigrating to the United States in 1997. After graduating from the University of Southern California, Téa received her MFA in Fiction from the Creative Writing Program at Cornell University in 2009. Téa was featured in *The New Yorker's* Top 20 Writers under 40 Fiction Issue (June 2010) and at 24, was the youngest on the list. Her short story, *The Laugh*, debuted in *The Atlantic* fiction issue and was then chosen for *The Best American Short Stories 2010*, a further short story, *The Sentry*, featured in the *Guardian Summer Fiction* Issue. Her journalism has appeared in *Harper's* magazine and she lives in Ithaca, New York.

Awards

2011 National Book Award for Fiction

2011 Orange Prize for Fiction

Reviews

Booklist

*/*Starred Review*/* Not even Obreht's place on the *New Yorker's* current "20 under 40" list of exceptional writers will prepare readers for the transporting richness and surprise of this gripping novel of legends and loss in a broken land. Drawing on the former Yugoslavia's fabled past and recent bloodshed, Belgrade-born Obreht portrays two besieged doctors. Natalia is on an ill-advised "good will" medical mission at an orphanage on what is suddenly the "other side," now that war has broken out, when she learns that her grandfather, a distinguished doctor forced out of his practice by ethnic divides, has died far from home. She is beset by memories, particularly of her grandfather taking her to the zoo to see the tigers. We learn the source of his fascination in mesmerizing flashbacks, meeting the village butcher, the deaf-mute Muslim woman he married, and a tiger who escaped the city zoo after it was bombed by the Germans. Of equal mythic mystery is the story of the "deathless man." Moments of breathtaking magic, wildness,

and beauty are paired with chilling episodes in which superstition overrides reason; fear and hatred smother compassion; and inexplicable horror rules. Every word, every scene, every thought is blazingly alive in this many-faceted, spellbinding, and rending novel of death, succor, and remembrance.

Library Journal/*Starred Review*/

In the torn-up Balkans, as medic Natalia is preparing to cross what was once not a border to help vaccinate orphans, she learns that her distinguished physician grandfather has died in an obscure clinic not far from where she's going. No one knows what he was doing there, though Natalia does know he was seriously ill. This incident opens up Obreht's dizzyingly nuanced yet crisp, muscularly written narrative by allowing Natalia to introduce two stories (fables? truth?) that her grandfather related to her. One concerns the "deathless man" her grandfather sometimes encountered, who collected the souls of the dead. The other concerns a tiger that escaped from the zoo during World War II and made its way to the village where her grandfather lived as a boy. Attempts to kill the tiger fail, but the butcher's abused, deaf-mute wife seems mystically connected to the great beast, rousing the villagers' fear and anger. That tiger—and others seen later at the zoo—looms here as a symbol of defiant, struggling hope as the deathless man continues his task. VERDICT Demanding one's full attention, this complex, humbling, and beautifully crafted debut from one of *The New Yorker's* 20 Under 40 is highly recommended for anyone seriously interested in contemporary fiction.

BookPage Reviews

Seeking truth in family stories

Sometime in the not-too-distant future Téa Obreht plans to move to New York City. "That's where the action is, I guess," she says, sounding in the same instant both eager and skeptical.

But for now, Obreht lives in Ithaca, New York, where she has remained since finishing her M.F.A. at Cornell two years ago. In Ithaca's relative calm she has ridden out the hoopla of being named to the *New Yorker's* list of the 20 best writers under 40—and at 25, she is the youngest writer on that list. "Ithaca is a nice environment to write in, and I have a community of writers here, so I have stayed," says Obreht, who is remarkably composed for a young writer cast suddenly into the limelight. "Besides, changing environments in a situation where the book was in final edits wasn't something I wanted to do."

"I was interested in the point [that] a story becomes so important to a person that it doesn't matter if it's truth or legend."

The book in question is Obreht's stirringly accomplished first novel, *The Tiger's Wife*. Set in an unnamed country in the Balkans after prolonged civil war, the story is narrated by a young doctor named Natalia as she travels into the borderlands, where emotions about the war are still raw, to deliver medicine to an orphanage. Early in her journey Natalia learns that her grandfather, also a doctor, has died in a remote village while on his own mission of mercy. Her grandmother asks Natalia to retrieve a packet of his belongings. As Natalia travels deeper into the fraught landscape, she unravels the meaning of the two central stories that ran "like secret rivers through all the other stories of [her

grandfather's] life"—the story of his repeated meetings with the deathless man and the story of his childhood experience with the tiger's wife.

Like her narrator, Obreht was very close to her grandfather. She was born in Belgrade in 1985 and lived there with her grandparents and her mother until 1992, "when things got pretty heated." As fighting intensified in the former Yugoslavia, her family fled.

"My grandfather was an engineer and he had connections in different places, so we ended up in Cyprus for a year. Then we lived in Cairo for three and a half years until we were lucky enough to come to the United States. A lot of our family lived in a far suburb of Atlanta, so we lived there for two or three years. And then my mother met my stepfather and we moved to Palo Alto." The summer before she left for Cornell her grandfather died. "He was always very supportive of my decision and desire to write," she says. On his deathbed he asked her to write under his family name—Obreht—"and now I do."

Obreht has been writing since the age of eight. As an undergraduate she "went to the University of Southern California to study creative writing, with the full support of my mother. But she also wanted me to have an additional major so I could get an actual job. So I chose art history!" she says, laughing. At USC, Obreht wrote prolifically at first and then stopped for a year. "In any artistic endeavor when you're just learning something, there comes a moment in your progress when you hit a wall and the wall is simply there. And the only way for that wall or curtain or whatever it is to dissolve is to wait it out."

Obreht's wait lasted until her senior year, when she took a workshop with T.C. Boyle. "I suddenly understood there was this whole thing to be done with structure, how it works and looks and what it feels like to read a good short story and understand what makes it good," she says. "After that, writing for me was the absolute top priority once again and it has remained so."

The Tiger's Wife, Obreht says, began as "a terrible short story that took all kinds of beatings in workshops. It failed but there was something I was really attached to and I wasn't willing to give up on—the tiger. I'll say without embarrassment that writing the tiger sections was my favorite part of the process. I write out of chronological order. I skip around a lot. But I wanted to stay with his character and go on this journey with him. So those were the parts that got written first."

As the story grew, Obreht drew first on things she knew from her own life and from stories her relatives told her. Then in the summer of 2009 she went to Serbia and Croatia "to hunt for vampires for *Harper's*" (her nonfiction piece appeared in the November 2010 issue of the magazine). "We ended up bumming around a lot of villages in a car with a tape recorder, getting out and asking, 'Does this village have any vampire stories?' It ended up being a much-needed lesson in village life, the way village society functions, the way myths operate in a village setting."

The result of that research is one of the most powerful aspects of *The Tiger's Wife*—the novel's strong sense of place: not merely place as vividly described locale, but place as the location of layers of often conflicting emotion. In the villages Natalia visits, for example, the recent civil war is never discussed, but the sorrow and distrust it has left behind seem to seep out of the earth itself.

Likewise, Obreht's exploration of folktales and myths adds powerful resonance—and compassion—to her narrative. "I think when people suffer great tragedy, they turn to myths," Obreht says. "I was interested in the point a story becomes so important to a person that it doesn't matter if it's truth or legend. Sometimes the fact that the story exists at all is moving in itself. I think there's a lot of that where I come from, and a lot of that generally in the world."

The final thread in the development of *The Tiger's Wife*, Obreht says, was her experience of her grandfather's death. "I had tried for a long time not to deal with it and not to think about it and say to myself, 'I'm doing fine. I'm great.' Then this story started to come together with this narrator who had a grandfather who had died. . . . Maybe this isn't the right thing to say because we're talking about writing. But personally in the process of writing this novel I ended up making peace with the fact that my grandfather was dead. I'm not pleased with this [in the sense of] 'oh, this is an accomplishment,' but somehow . . . it became a fact that I could process in a way that I hadn't thought I could do before. The writing of the book got me there, and I'm happy."

Kirkus Reviews/*Starred Review*/

Young physician navigating postwar chaos in the Balkans tries to make sense of the mysterious death of her beloved grandfather.

En route to a rural orphanage with plans on inoculating a group of motherless local kids, 28-year-old Natalia gets the sudden, sad news that her grandfather, a well-respected doctor, has passed away. That he died far from home, in a village that appears on no map, raises several questions, in spite of the fact that the old man had been suffering from cancer. Natalia takes it upon herself to investigate the clinic he was last seen in, and collect his affects, while trying to fulfill her medical obligations to the orphans. A clear-eyed realist who came of age during the bloody dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, she is nonetheless enchanted by a story from her grandfather's childhood, which is interwoven with the modern-day narrative. During World War II, his tiny hometown was menaced by a semi-tame tiger who had escaped from a zoo. According to legend, the animal was befriended by the butcher's wife, a young deaf-mute who fed him meat. After her abusive husband disappears, the superstitious villagers suspect that the beast himself is the father of her unborn child, complicating life for the tiger as well as the girl, who happens to be Muslim. They send a famed hunter after the tiger, who, like the butcher, assumes an uncertain fate. In a timeless parallel, the modern-day villagers that Natalia is trying to help have a mystical tale of their own, and she is enlisted to help them find closure in a most unusual way. Haunted as it is by the specter of civil war, this confident debut steers clear of specific blame for any particular group, concentrating instead on the stories people tell themselves to explain the unthinkable. While at times a bit too dense and confusing, Obreht's remarkable story showcases a young talent with a bright future.

A compassionate, mystical take on the real price of war.

Publishers Weekly/*Starred Review*/

The sometimes crushing power of myth, story, and memory is explored in the brilliant debut of Obreht, the youngest of the *New Yorker's* 20-under-40. Natalia Stefanovi, a doctor living (and, in between suspensions, practicing) in an unnamed country that's a ringer for Obreht's native Croatia, crosses the border in search of answers about the death of her beloved grandfather, who raised her on tales from the village he grew up in, and where, following German bombardment in 1941, a tiger escaped from the zoo in a nearby city and befriended a mysterious deaf-mute woman. The evolving story of the

tiger's wife, as the deaf-mute becomes known, forms one of three strands that sustain the novel, the other two being Natalia's efforts to care for orphans and a wayward family who, to lift a curse, are searching for the bones of a long-dead relative; and several of her grandfather's stories about Gavran Gailé, the deathless man, whose appearances coincide with catastrophe and who may hold the key to all the stories that ensnare Natalia. Obrecht is an expert at depicting history through aftermath, people through the love they inspire, and place through the stories that endure; the reflected world she creates is both immediately recognizable and a legend in its own right. Obrecht is talented far beyond her years, and her unsentimental faith in language, dream, and memory is a pleasure.

Discussion questions (<http://www.randomhouse.com>)

1. Natalia says that the key to her grandfather's life and death "lies between two stories: the story of the tiger's wife, and the story of the deathless man." What power do the stories we tell about ourselves have to shape our identity and help us understand our lives?
2. Which of the different ways the characters go about making peace with the dead felt familiar from your own life? Which took you by surprise?
3. Natalia believes that her grandfather's memories of the village apothecary "must have been imperishable." What lesson do you think he might have learned from what happened to the Apothecary?
4. What significance does the tiger have to the different characters in the novel: Natalia, her grandfather, the tiger's wife, the villagers? Why do you think Natalia's grandfather's reaction to the tiger's appearance in the village was so different than the rest of the villagers?
5. "The story of this war—dates, names, who started it, why— that belongs to everyone," Natalia's grandfather tells her. But "those moments you keep to yourself" are more important. By eliding place names and specific events of recent Balkan history, what do you think the author is doing?
6. When the deathless man and the grandfather share a last meal before the bombing of Sarobor, the grandfather urges the deathless man to tell the waiter his fate so he can go home and be with his family. Is Gavran Gailé right to decide to stop telling people that they are going to die? Would you rather know your death was coming or go "in suddenness"?
7. Did knowing more about Luka's past make him more sympathetic? Why do you think the author might have chosen to give the back stories of Luka, Dariša the Bear, and the

apothecary?

8. The copy of *The Jungle Book* Natalia's grandfather always carries around in his coat pocket is not among the possessions she collects after his death. What do you think happens to it?
9. The novel moves back and forth between myth and modern-day "real life." What did you think of the juxtaposition of folklore and contemporary realism?
10. Of all the themes of this novel—war, storytelling, family, death, myth, etc.—which one resonated the most for you?

Readalikes (*Books & Authors*)

Atmospheric Disturbances: A Novel by Rivka Galchen

Dr. Leo Liebenstein has a patient named Harvey, who believes that he receives coded messages from meteorologists informing him how to control the weather. Leo's wife, Rema, suggests an unusual method to cure Harvey. She tells her husband to pretend that he is one of the secret meteorologists sending Harvey messages, and he gives it a try. Then, one day, Rema and Harvey both suddenly go missing--sort of. Leo believes that an imposter has taken his wife's place. She looks like his wife, but she is not the woman he loves. To find her, Leo tracks down a real meteorologist, whom he believes can help him. His search takes him halfway across the world. Ultimately, Leo discovers that nothing is quite what it appears to be.

Everything Is Illuminated by Jonathan Safran Foer

This debut novel uses large doses of humor to tell a story-within-a-story. Written in broken English, the book is narrated by Alex, a Ukrainian student, working in his family's travel agency. He helps people, mostly American Jews, locate their ancestral villages. Jonathan, an American college student, hires Alex to find the old woman who helped his grandfather escape the Nazis. Alex embarks on an exhaustive search with his grandfather and the story unfolds as Alex details the methods employed. Interspersed with Alex's account are parts of Jonathan's unfinished novel dealing with his family's history dating back to the 18th and 19th century.

The Goat Bridge by T.M. McNally

In the 1990s, American photographer Stephen Briggs is devastated because his son has disappeared in Rome. Despite his worry, Briggs heads to Sarajevo, Bosnia, which is involved in a bloody, violent war at the time. As he travels through the city, he does what he knows best, taking pictures of the people and places around him. He's touched by the situations and circumstances he faces. Throughout *The Goat Bridge*, Briggs forms relationships with many locals as well as other reporters and photographers who are there covering the war. In particular, he forms a close relationship with Elise, a German

reporter.

The Heart Specialist by Claire Holden Rothman

Inspired by the true story of Maude Elizabeth Seymour Abbott, a pioneering female Canadian doctor, this historical novel by Claire Holden Rothman follows a young woman's quest for personal and professional fulfillment. Agnes White's childhood in late 19th century Canada is exceptionally difficult. Born Agnes Bourret, she and her pregnant mother are abandoned by her father, a physician, when he is erroneously accused of murder. Not long after Agnes's baby sister is born, her mother dies and the girls are taken in by their grandmother. Haunted by memories of her father, Agnes is intent on their eventual reunion--and on becoming a doctor. Although medical schools do not accept women, Agnes overcomes numerous obstacles and not only earns her degree, but goes on to perform groundbreaking cardiac research.

Homecoming: A Novel by Bernhard Schlink; Michael Henry Heim

Originally written in German by Bernhard Schlink and translated by Michael Henry Heim, offers a philosophical look at the life of protagonist Peter Debauer. The main character doesn't remember anything about his father, but he has a strong connection to his paternal grandparents who lived in Switzerland when he was a young boy. When Peter visited them, he would always study pictures of his father in hopes of learning something about him. Now that Peter is an adult, he begins to have more questions about his dad. His quest for answers calls up the long-forgotten memory of a book entitled *Novels for Your Reading Pleasure and Entertainment*. The collection contained the story of a soldier named Karl, who returned home after battle to find that his family had continued with their lives without him. The tale of Karl is incomplete, and Peter desperately wants to find the ending. He truly believes that this story holds the answers to his father's identity and he sets out on a journey to locate the book's author

The Lazarus Project by Aleksandar Hemon

Author Aleksandar Hemon uses a real historical event that shocked the city of Chicago as a launching point for his novel *The Lazarus Project*. In 1908, a young, Jewish man named Lazarus Averbuch went to the home of George Shippy, Chicago's chief of police, to deliver a message. After knocking on Shippy's door, Averbuch presented the chief with a letter. Shippy then shot the 19-year-old man, later defending his actions in a statement that labeled Averbuch a would-be terrorist. In the midst of the political and racial turmoil, Averbuch's sister, Olga, was left alone to defend herself against the police and the media. A century later, Vladimir Brik, an American writer originally from Bosnia, unearths Averbuch's story and decides to look for the truth behind the tragic events. With his friend Rora, a photographer, they travel to Eastern Europe, where they begin to unwind the mystery behind Averbuch's death and share their own histories with each other.

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

In the early nineteenth century, idealistic Jose Arcadio Buendia and his pragmatic wife, Ursula, found a village and dynasty. Six generations of their descendants experience birth, marriage, death, religion, politics war, and nature in a cyclical, interconnected way that

represents the history of Latin America. The author's style of magical realism combines fantasy with social satire in this masterpiece of contemporary fiction.

Portrait in Sepia by Isabel Allende

Eliza Sommers, the protagonist of Allende's *Daughter of Fortune*, is one of the grandmothers of the heroine, Aurora del Valle, in this novel. The novel begins when Aurora is 30, as she reviews her past to determine where the nightmares that have haunted her for years originated. Aurora's mother, Lynn, dies during childbirth while in Chinatown, San Francisco in 1880. Aurora doesn't know the identity of her father and her memory of the next five years of her life has been blurred by traumatic childhood events. She is raised in Chile by her grandmother, formidable businesswoman Paulina del Valle, and enjoys a certain amount of freedom uncommon for women at the turn of the century. Yet after entering a marriage that is not what she expected, her search for the truth of her parentage and the events of her early life give her purpose. She follows a circuitous path that leads from Chile to California and to her other grandmother, Eliza, and her grandfather, the Chinese doctor Tao Chi'en. Characters from Allende's 1987 novel, *House of the Spirits*, also appear.



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