INTRODUCTION BY STEPHEN M. DICKEY

The Walnut Mansion, published in 2003, is the first novel by Miljenko Jergović, one of the most well-known contemporary writers in Croatia and Bosnia. He has been a major figure in a wave of “new realism” that has been predominant in the fiction of younger writers of the former Yugoslavia since the breakup of the country. But Jergović’s literary artistry is hardly limited to fiction: he has authored several collections of poetry, two collections of essays, three collections of short stories, and one novella.

The Walnut Mansion won the Bosnia and Herzegovina Writers’ Association Prize in 2003, and Jergović’s other works have earned him numerous other awards. He received the Mak Dizdar Prize and the Goran Prize (both in 1988) for his first collection of poetry, *The Warsaw Observatory*; the Ksaver Šandor Gjalski Prize (1994) for *Sarajevo Marlboro*; the Matica Hrvatska Prize for Literature and the August Šenoa Art Prize for *Buick Rivera* (2002); the Premio Grinzane Cavour Prize (2003) for *Mama Leone* (1999); his novel *Ruta Tannenbaum* (2006) won him the Meša Selimović Award for best novel of the year in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro (2007). Most recently, he received the Angelus Central European Literature Award in 2012 for the Polish translation of his novel *Srda Sings at Dusk on Pentecost*.

If one judges according to output, literary awards, and the number of translations, Jergović is one of the top two contemporary Croatian writers—the other being Dubravka Ugrešić. If Ugrešić is better known among Anglophone readers, this is due in part to the fact that Jergović has remained continually “on the ground” in Bosnia and Croatia, writing squarely for the local populations of Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs, a position that has resulted in fewer of his works being published in English translations. (Hopefully the present effort will help rectify this situation.) A further reason is that Jergović’s tales are almost without exception situated within lands of the former Yugoslavia—primarily in Croatia and Bosnia. They make almost continual mention of historical and cultural particulars of the region and therefore may seem more difficult to translate and less accessible to an outside readership. (Again, it is hoped that the present work will dispel at least the latter notion.) Indeed, it is this writer’s impression that Jergović is the contemporary paradigm of a Balkan/Southeast European storyteller:

he writes stories and novels replete with the charm and tragedy of the region that local and outsider alike simply can't put down.

Given his prolific *oeuvre*, Jergović can only be described as very reticent concerning the details of his own biography; he provides the following statement on his website: "Miljenko Jergović was born in 1966 in Sarajevo. He currently lives outside of Zagreb."¹ In addition to his literary activity, he works as a journalist for the *Jutarnji list* newspaper and is also a columnist for the Radio Sarajevo website and the Belgrade newspaper *Politika*. Since Jergović grew up as a Bosnian and has lived and worked for twenty years primarily in Croatia, he is probably best conditionally (and for lack of a clearly better alternative) identified as a Bosnian/Croatian writer.² (Note that ethnic identification has been no idle game in the former Yugoslavia and its successor states.)

Though *The Walnut Mansion* is Jergović's first novel, in its length and scope it arguably remains his most ambitious (though his latest novel, *Kin*, published in 2013, surely competes in this regard). It presents the author's vision of life in twentieth-century Yugoslavia, told through the experiences of a family from the Croatian city of Dubrovnik. In particular, it tells the story of a woman named Regina Delavale, whose life is tracked backward, from her death in 2002 as a demented ninety-seven-year-old woman to her birth in 1905. The chapters are even numbered in reverse, so that the novel begins with chapter 15 and ends with chapter 1. The focus of the novel is, in Jergović's words, a tale of "the small in the great"—the momentous events of the twentieth century share the timeline with the failed romances, petty arguments, moneymaking schemes, traffic accidents, private obsessions, bedtime stories, jokes, lies, panicked mistakes, births, and all manner of deaths of the members and acquaintances of a common Dubrovnik family.

In all, episodes from five generations of Regina's family are narrated in the novel. It includes more than fifty characters and ultimately spans a period of more than one hundred years, taking place mostly in Croatia and Bosnia. It should therefore come as no surprise that in an interview with the newspaper *Slobodna Dalmacija* in 2003 Jergović described it as an attempt at writing a "quintessential" novel.³ But if *The Walnut Mansion* has an epic scale, its epic is not the heroism of South Slavic tradition, but (as pointed out above) an epic of small, ordinary people. And it is in particular an epic of women, as the females are the central characters that provide continuity to the story. The central theme of the novel is how these women struggle and endure amid the fallout from the misfortunes and cataclysms (most notably the Second World War) that afflicted those living in the lands of the former Yugoslavia during the twentieth century.

If the references to the history of the region seem confusing to the un-

initiated, it is for good reason. The lands of the former Yugoslavia have basically constituted a frontier zone where the cultures and legacies of the Byzantine (Orthodox), Ottoman (Islamic), and West European (Austro-Hungarian and Italian; Catholic) imperial traditions have coexisted, competed, and also fought throughout the modern era. Within the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina—Jergović's homeland—has been the region where the interaction among these cultures has been the most intense and immediate.

The earliest events recounted in the novel occur in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire (the late nineteenth century). The Ottomans had conquered the Byzantine Empire and the medieval Serbian and Bosnian kingdoms basically by the mid-fifteenth century. The Croatian territories ceded their sovereignty to the Habsburg Empire in the hope of avoiding Ottoman conquest in the early sixteenth century; this strategy worked, but at the cost of Austro-Hungarian rule until that empire was dismantled following the First World War. This expansion of Austrian rule into Croatia, combined with the rule of the Adriatic coast by the Venetian Republic from the Middle Ages until Napoleon's conquest of the latter, accounts for much of the historical context of the novel (and Austria-Hungary is mentioned much more frequently than one might expect in a novel about twentieth-century Yugoslavia). Further, the Treaty of Zadar compelled Venice to accept the establishment of the independent maritime Republic of Dubrovnik in 1358. The republic existed from that year until 1808, navigating alternating periods of trade, tension, and outright warfare between the Ottomans and their Austrian and Venetian opponents. The small Republic of Dubrovnik and thus its capital city were known for the value they placed on freedom and their independent spirit. One can arguably see some of that spirit in the actions of the characters in *The Walnut Mansion*. However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the independent spirit of Dubrovnik and renowned Balkan stubbornness, and some might even argue that they are one and the same.

In the early modern era the territories of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina became the locus of a static military frontier between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, a situation that contributed in large part to a frontier mentality and an ethos of resistance (to ideological commitment) to various outside players with an interest in the area. This spirit was conducive to various movements for national independence from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires and, as an outgrowth, the idea of a pan-South Slavic state—Yugoslavia—in the nineteenth century. Complicating such independence movements were actions taken by Austria-Hungary to fill the power vacuum left by the weakening Ottoman Empire, most notably the occupation

and subsequent annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878 and 1908 respectively). As mentioned above, the introduction of Austro-Hungarian rule in the wake of the Ottomans forms the immediate historical background of the novel, which, however, is encountered only at its end.

The idea of Yugoslavia gained political momentum during the First World War, and the end of the war in 1918 saw the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which was soon plagued by ethnic antagonisms. Royal Yugoslavia hobbled along until the Axis invaded the country in April 1941, in preparation for its attack on the Soviet Union. Hitler's conquest of Yugoslavia was followed by four years of unprecedented bloodletting, but most Yugoslav casualties were victims of their compatriots. In particular, in the fascist Independent State of Croatia Ante Pavelić's Ustashes (including both Croats and some Bosniaks) exterminated Jews, Serbs, and Roma; in eastern Bosnia, Draža Mihailović's Serbian guerillas (Chetniks) massacred large numbers of Bosniaks. Josip Broz Tito's Soviet-backed Partisans fought both the Ustashes and at times the Chetniks in their war against the Nazis. These names and terms are mentioned repeatedly in the novel.

After the Second World War, Tito and his communist Partisans took control of the country. Yugoslav communism was not as repressive as Soviet (and especially Stalinist) communism, and Tito's postwar policies soon earned him the ire of the Soviets, culminating in a tense Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948, which was welcomed by the West. Tito then steered Yugoslavia on its own independent course, while remaining committed to socialism. His international promotion of the Non-Aligned Movement can be seen as elevating the frontier mentality of the region to the level of global political ideology. After Tito's death in 1980, it seems in retrospect only to have been a matter of time before the country broke up, as communist Yugoslavia failed badly in the economic sector and also failed (as had its interwar predecessor) to create an identity to replace the ethnic loyalties of its citizens. That time came in 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia seceded from the country, which had come under the control of the Serbian nationalist technocrat Slobodan Milošević; Bosnia and Herzegovina followed suit in 1992. Bloodletting reminiscent of the Second World War followed as well and was particularly vicious in Bosnia, a situation that led Jergović to leave Sarajevo and settle in Croatia. The outbreak of war in Croatia and the shelling of Dubrovnik by Serbian and Montenegrin forces in 1991 are mentioned in passing late in the chronological time of the novel (which is early in the story, as it is told in reverse).

If Jergović is a quintessential Balkan storyteller, his literary horizons nevertheless lie far beyond that region. In his interview with *Slobodna Dalmacija*,

he revealed some noteworthy outside influences, including Zadie Smith and Jonathan Franzen, as they “prove that there is such a thing as an epic of the new millennium and that it makes sense to tackle the big themes on a scale that calls a motion picture to mind.” In addition to other print influences (ranging from Fernand Braudel’s theory of history to Baedeker travel guides), Jergović emphasizes the influence of film (Italian Neorealism and Fellini’s *Amarcord*, as well as the work of Douglas Sirk) and music (Arab, Latin American, Roma, and the lyrics of Bosnian *sevdah* and Croatian *klapa* songs).

These self-acknowledged connections place Jergović not only in the Yugoslav cosmopolitan milieu that was open to Western influences (and one might consider a “Central European” current in Yugoslav culture), but also in the specifically Balkan (i.e., indigenously Southeast European and/or post-Ottoman) culture of the region. He is less a part of its Orthodox element.

The Walnut Mansion falls into a rich tradition of the family saga in modern world literature, and I think it is indisputably a rewarding read even for those with no knowledge of the former Yugoslavia. However, in what follows I focus mostly on aspects of the novel as they relate to the literary and political contexts of the former Yugoslavia. The novel is extremely interesting with regard to the post-Yugoslav “space” and deserves some comment in this regard.

There have been relatively few works that could count as family sagas in the literatures of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia. In Croatian literature, Vjenceslav Novak chronicled the fall of a noble family in Senj on the Adriatic coast in *The Last of the Stipančičes*, and Miroslav Krleža chronicled the rise and fall of the Glembaj family in eleven short stories and three plays. (One might also mention here Ivo Vojnović’s *Dubrovnik Trilogy*, which, though not a family saga, narrates the demise of the Republic of Dubrovnik and the Dubrovnik nobility, which is echoed in the narrative of a Dubrovnik family in *The Walnut Mansion*.) Some important single-work representatives of the genre come from Serbian literature: Ivo Andrić’s *The Woman from Sarajevo* and Mirko Kovač’s *The Door of the Womb*; one might argue for the inclusion of Borisav Stanković’s *The Tainted Blood*. None of these novels really covers more than two generations of a family, and in this respect *The Walnut Mansion*, with its span of five generations, appears to be unique.

As mentioned, *The Walnut Mansion* is also remarkable for its focus on female characters, as well as the prominence of female psychological narrative. Into the twentieth century most South Slavs lived in patriarchal societies, and their fiction tended to focus on male characters and values, even when criticizing a patriarchal social order (a perfect example of this is Krleža’s *On the Edge of Reason*). It is interesting that some notable exceptions to the trend of

dominant male characters come from Serbian literature, where the patriarchal social order has been slow in dying out. Here one can mention Stanković's *The Tainted Blood*, Miloš Crnjanski's *Migrations*, and Andrić's *The Woman from Sarajevo*. *The Walnut Mansion* differs from the first two in that Jergović is not portraying women of exceptional physical beauty (in fact, Regina's looks are barely described in the novel). It does bear a strong resemblance to *Migrations* because Regina is the prism through which the narratives of numerous male characters are viewed, just as Dafina in *Migrations* is ultimately the glue that holds the narratives of the brothers Vuk and Arandel Isaković together.

Though *The Woman from Sarajevo* is a rather odd tale of a misanthrope, it anticipates the major theme of *The Walnut Mansion*: the effect of cataclysmic historical events on an ordinary woman. The withdrawal of the protagonist of *The Woman from Sarajevo* from society after the First World War arguably subdues this theme, whereas *The Walnut Mansion* almost continuously foregrounds the watershed events of history and their effect on Regina's life, beginning with the First World War, continuing with the Second World War and various postwar events such as the death of Josip Broz Tito. The conduct of Jergović's female characters in these events differs greatly from that of the men in their lives, who with one or two exceptions see these events as opportunities for enrichment, adventure, or revenge and almost inevitably perish, leaving their women to fend for themselves.

With this in mind, one could describe *The Walnut Mansion* as a kind of "her-story" of life in twentieth-century Yugoslavia. In one of the bloody climaxes of the novel, the narrator even directly comments on the differences between the sexes with regard to history: "Men write history with knives, and women summon it with words."

Regina's brother Luka, selling cheese at a market, makes a like-minded comment on historical greatness and the attitudes of the sexes toward it:

The real truth of history hasn't been written down, but as there are no living witnesses, it's simplest to say that Napoleon never ate lunch or dinner like ordinary people. Instead of eating, he conquered the world. Instead of drinking, he waged war. So was Napoleon, my good people, a great man? Well, missus, you tell me: would you rather have your husband grab a rifle and shoot up the street, kill all the neighbors, and go on a war of conquest instead of lunching on those delicious mackerels you've bought?

At another point, the narrator slips in a more general comment that reveals the novel's approach to history at the end of some reflections on Bosnia as a

“Yugoslavia in miniature”: “If a story about the great in the small could have been recast into a story about the small in the great, the history of our country would look very different, and we would seem more normal to those who will one day study it.”

This is an important point, and it adds to the comments made above regarding the focus of the novel on the common problems of common people: a superficial familiarity with the history of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans leaves one with the impression of a region of eternal memory and almost continual bloodletting and strife that “has produced more history than it could consume locally,” as Churchill is alleged to have said. (This false impression finds one of its most extreme presentations in Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*.) Of course, many of the characters in *The Walnut Mansion* are colorful, to say the least, but they are nevertheless *ordinary people*—people in whom most readers from anywhere ought to be able to recognize some of themselves.

The novel also makes the point, slowly, concentrically, that the edifices of an age are made small by the passing of time. Indeed, Regina’s brother Bepo, living out his days in an asylum, states the idea in a fresh, prospective way:

We believe that communism is something great and eternal. We think so because it is in proportion to us, but it won’t be for our children and our children’s children. The little ones can’t understand the big people, just as we can’t understand them. We know only that communism will seem trivial to them. They’ll take a red banner between two fingers, like this, and will walk across Russia in three steps because Russia will seem small to them too, much smaller than Pelješac. You just watch children growing big and you see that there’s no point in measuring the world on a scale bigger than your own life.

Russia is not the heart of the matter; one need only substitute “Russia” with “Yugoslavia” or some other cultural titan to bring the idea home. The children of today will walk over our edifices as if they were toys.

Inextricably linked with its telling of history through the eyes of ordinary people is the aforementioned reverse chronological order of the narrative. In recent years, reverse chronology has been a popular device in novels (e.g., Viktor Pelevin’s *The Yellow Arrow*) and movies (e.g., *Memento*, *Irreversible*). Though it is often considered a postmodern technique, Jergović maintains that he employed reverse chronology simply to “follow the logic of an individual human history, the logic of memory.”⁴ Indeed, at one point the narrator suggests that “every whole human story starts from the end.” This adherence to the logic of memory can explain the segues into the stories of peripheral characters that

some reviewers have found distracting.⁵ But it is precisely these digressions into the “lateral zones” of the plot that provide a fuller picture of life and enrich the historical perspective. The so-called digressions and nested narratives are far from alien to the literature of the region but recall the digressive nature of its folk epics, as well as the narrative approach of none other than Ivo Andrić (as in, for example, *The Damned Yard*).⁶

Jergović’s emphasis on memory in the novel calls to mind Danilo Kiš’s short story “The Encyclopedia of the Dead.” In this story a woman dreams of a trip to Sweden, where in the Royal Library she finds the *Encyclopedia of the Dead*, a massive set of volumes that provides detailed chronicles of the lives of ordinary people, and reads its detailed account of her deceased father’s life. She describes the *Encyclopedia* as a “treasury” of memory produced by writers who “record and value every life, every affliction, every human lifetime.” These words could almost be a description of the approach to historical narrative of *The Walnut Mansion*. Likewise, the temporal structure of *The Walnut Mansion* is very reminiscent of that of the *Encyclopedia*, as described by the narrator: “Every period of time was rendered in a kind of poetic quintessence and metaphor, not always chronologically, but in a strange symbiosis of different times — past, present and future. How else can one explain a sad comment in that text, in that ‘picture book’ of the first five years he spent at his grandfather’s in Komogovina, which reads, if I remember correctly, ‘Those *would be* the best years of his life’?”

Not only does the reverse chronology of *The Walnut Mansion* produce such a “strange symbiosis of different times,” but it even employs the future-in-the-past quite frequently, as in the following random example taken from early on in the novel: “That evening saw the occurrence of everything that *would lead* to the death of Regina Delavale, or crazy Manda” (my emphasis — SMD).

Thus, Kiš’s description of the *Encyclopedia of the Dead* seems at the same time to be a fairly accurate outline of the narrative strategy of *The Walnut Mansion*. The *Encyclopedia of the Dead* is of course a fantasy, even within the world of Kiš’s story, but the tale of Regina Delavale reads almost like a sprawling entry in the *Encyclopedia*. In any case, one cannot read *The Walnut Mansion* and come away unconvinced that Jergović is a writer who “values every life, every affliction, every human lifetime.”

Jergović tips his hat to numerous writers of the lands of the former Yugoslavia, and Kiš is only one of them. (There are, by the way, other allusions to Kiš in the novel. For example, Jergović makes a passing play on Kiš’s story “Last Respects,” which tells of the honors bestowed upon a prostitute at her funeral. The honors are inverted in *The Walnut Mansion*: a group of prostitutes gathers to honor the memory of Luka, their spendthrift faux-client.)

I have already mentioned the focus on the effect of history on ordinary people common to *The Walnut Mansion* and Andrić's *The Woman from Sarajevo*. On a more general level (and leaving aside the reverse chronology of *The Walnut Mansion*), Jergović's narrative style shares many similarities with that of Andrić. This is not surprising, as both Andrić and Jergović were raised in Bosnia, a land where oral traditions have been strong and the people take delight in storytelling. And Jergović has certainly made no efforts to distance himself from Andrić's writing, even or especially at times when Andrić came under fire in both Croatia and Bosnia itself for his Serbian self-identification.

An important similarity is the multitude of voices in their stories. Like Andrić's prose, *The Walnut Mansion* is decidedly polyphonic: a great many voices tell stories and anecdotes that contribute to the overall depiction of life in twentieth-century Yugoslavia. And as with Andrić, though there is an omniscient narrator who does not narrate in a distinct voice, that omniscient narrator does occasionally comment directly on the plot or its themes as if actually speaking with the reader. A further feature that Jergović shares with Andrić is the frequent employment of free indirect discourse, which allows the omniscient narrator to seamlessly render the characters' thoughts.

Other writers to whom an attentive reader can find allusions are those as different as the Serb Borislav Pekić, the Croat Miroslav Krleža, and the Bosnian Meša Selimović (and there are certainly others that have escaped my attention). It thus makes no sense to try to pigeonhole Jergović as a writer who self-identifies with only one of the increasingly ethnically homogeneous enclaves that have risen out of the ashes of the former Yugoslavia. And it should be pointed out that he does not "long for [the state of] Yugoslavia; what perished had to."⁷ Rather, Jergović appears to be an odd thing—a *post-Yugoslav writer*, in the literal sense of the term, and in a cultural sense, as opposed to a political one. It is doubtful that he would agree to be considered anything else. And his work, including *The Walnut Mansion*, is the richer for it.

One last point worth mentioning is that the story of Regina Delavale's life lends itself to interpretation as an allegory of the fate of Yugoslavia. Regina's rampages in the final days of her life, in which she lays waste to an entire apartment (a container of life, much as states are), seem to be a metaphor for the bloody rampages of paramilitaries that ended the state of Yugoslavia. And the reader travels back slowly to her childhood and then to her birth, when she is given a toy house carved in walnut. The little wooden house stands as a symbol of the novel's idea that the legacies left by a generation seem tiny to future generations. (Indeed, Tito's Yugoslavia was destroyed by politicians who belonged to the generation that came after its founders.) And in this way the little house

in walnut can also be seen as a metaphor for the state granted to the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes by Woodrow Wilson and the Western powers after the First World War. Thus, the reverse chronology of the novel is oddly suitable for outside readers, the majority of whom first learned about Yugoslavia at its bloody end and only slowly worked their way backward to learn the history of the country.

Notes

1. [Http://www.jergovic.com/bio-bibliografija/](http://www.jergovic.com/bio-bibliografija/).
2. This label should not be confused with “Bosnian Croat”—that is, a Croat born and raised in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
3. [Http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20030716/forum01.asp](http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20030716/forum01.asp). Translations of his remarks in this interview are mine.
4. [Http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20030716/forum01.asp](http://arhiv.slobodnadalmacija.hr/20030716/forum01.asp).
5. See, for example, the review in the July 24, 2007, issue of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.
6. I’m grateful to Aida Vidan for pointing these aspects out to me.
7. [Http://bhknjiga.com/intervjumiljenko-jergovic-hrvati-su-sretniji-od-srba-zene-ce-im-prije-postati-europske-sobarice.html](http://bhknjiga.com/intervjumiljenko-jergovic-hrvati-su-sretniji-od-srba-zene-ce-im-prije-postati-europske-sobarice.html). Translation mine.