
 ПРИЛОЗИ И ГРАБА

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ON TRANSLATING ISIDORA SEKULIĆ'S STORY "BURE"

On a visit to Vojvodina in 2002, I spoke with scholars and writers I met about my hope to translate Isidora Sekulić into English. Sekulić (1877-1958) was the first well-known woman writer in Serbian literature, a friend of Nobel Prizewinner Ivo Andrić and an extremely interesting personality; her prose works are regularly reprinted, and her essays have been compared to those of Virginia Woolf. And yet a bit of research showed me that there was only one brief translation of her writing available in English—"Little Church on Topčider"—and not a very good translation at that. I had read some of Sekulić's works in graduate school and had given a few talks about her at conferences and a job interview. I was especially impressed by *Kronika palanačkog groblja*, although when I made a rough initial translation of just a few pages I saw how much her language differed from what I acquired after living for several months in Zagreb and reading authors like Miroslav Krleža or Dubravka Ugrešić.

A number of people told me that instead of *Kronika* I should start with the story "Bure"—as one man called it, a beautiful description of a girl's formation and coming of age. I was less taken with it than with *Kronika*, but the translation was a pleasure to make. The vocabulary was less of a challenge than *Kronika*'s (though many phrases were new to me), and the elegiac tone called for a gentle, slightly old-fashioned lexicon. The story first appeared in her first book, a volume of stories published in 1913, *Saputnici* [Fellow Travelers].²

Each of the substantial chapters of Sekulić's *Kronika* offers a broad and rich view of the society in which it is set. The author spends a long time with every major

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² See Isidora Sekulić, *Saputnici. Pripovetke I* (Novi Sad: Stylos, 2001), pp. 7-19. I was somewhat gratified to see that this edition includes a glossary of words and cultural references!

character, and the lengthy sections often see them from childhood into adulthood or from young adulthood into old age. “Bure” on the other hand covers just one season in the narrator’s life. A girl (who has lost her mother) creates an imaginary world inside an old barrel that stands in her yard and then must confront its wreck when winter approaches. There are strong undertones of family unhappiness and hints that precisely this unhappiness and the sense of being an outsider everywhere else but in books and in the barrel are what made the narrator into a writer. She creates a world of triumphant imagination on the page, more durable than the barrel in which the story’s narrator has created a refuge, though shot through by an immutable sadness. As far as I know, this story is the first place such a theme of female loss while growing up appears in Serbian literature, though it feels rather familiar to a western reader, as if we have been there before. Many readers know similar, earlier para-biographical works by Anglophone women writers. Yet how interesting to see the same set of delights and regrets emerge from this very specific story, as it describes life in a town in Vojvodina in the late 19th century.

Sekulić is far too little known in the west, and I hope that others will translate her as well! This story exists in English thanks to the well-meaning advice of readers: many Serbian readers consider the story typical of Sekulić or especially revelatory of her personality as a writer. If you have not yet read “Bure,” at least not in English, I hope this version will please you.

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