



Our Man in Iraq

Robert Periši? , Will Firth (Translation)

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2003: As Croatia lurches from socialism into globalized capitalism, Toni, a cocky journalist in Zagreb, struggles to balance his fragile career, pushy family, and hotheaded girlfriend. But in a moment of vulnerability he makes a mistake: volunteering his unhinged Arabic-speaking cousin Boris to report on the Iraq War. Boris begins filing Gonzo missives from the conflict zone and Toni decides it is better to secretly rewrite his cousin's increasingly incoherent ramblings than face up to the truth. But when Boris goes missing, Toni's own sense of reality—and reliability—begins to unravel.

Our Man In Iraq, the first of Robert Perišic's novels to be translated into English, serves as an unforgettable introduction to a vibrant voice from Croatia. With his characteristic humor and insight, Perišic gets to the heart of life made and remade by war.

"Robert Perišic depicts, with acerbic wit, a class of urban elites who are trying to reconcile their nineties rebellion with the reality of present-day Croatia. . . . The characters' snide remarks could easily sound cynical but the novel has a levity informed by the sense of social fluidity that comes with democracy." —*The New Yorker*

"Robert Perišic is a light bright with intelligence and twinkling with irony, flashing us the news that postwar Croatia not only endures but matters." —**Jonathan Franzen**

" . . . terrifically witty and original. . . in addition to being a delightfully acerbic primer on a literarily underrepresented part of Europe, *Our Man in Iraq* may well prove to be one of those rare cases where something is actually gained in translation." — *The Toronto Star*

Our Man in Iraq Details

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From Reader Review Our Man in Iraq for online ebook

Tonstant Weader says

Our Man in Iraq by Robert Perisic takes place in 2003, during those first few weeks of the Iraq War when some people still believe the war would be wrapped up and over in six weeks. Croatia is proud to be part of the “coalition of the willing” and the paper where Toni, our man in Zagreb, works wants to send their own reporter to cover the war. Toni recommends his cousin Boris, mainly because Boris speaks Arabic and partly out of family obligation.

But it is not working out. Boris is sending bizarre email reports that are stream of consciousness prose poems, part insight, part nonsense and utterly unusable for the paper. To cover up for his cousin and his nepotism, he rewrites the stories. But he is worried, his cousin seems to be losing touch with reality. But when Boris stops sending emails, things get worse. Toni is worried and Boris’ mother Milka is demanding explanations. Like many people, Toni ducks unpleasantness, not answering Milka’s calls. This blows up into a scandal broadcast on live TV that is both incredibly funny and devastating.

I had high expectations before I even read the first page of Our Man in Iraq. After all, not that many books by Croatian authors even get translated into English, so it had to be good to cross that bar. I have an abiding interest in the Balkans since reading the incomparable Black Lamb and Grey Falcon by Rebecca West. Since then I have read several nonfiction books including Robert Kaplan’s Balkan Ghosts. As far as literature, though, I had only read The Bridge on the Drina by Nobel Laureate Ivo Andrić, a Yugoslav writer from Bosnia.

Our Man in Iraq is post liberation, post war, during the early exuberant years of Croatian democracy and that excitement and freedom is important to the setting of the book. These are the first generation of people who really get to choose their destiny, or as Toni put it, “No one is obliged to inherit an identity now.” Toni’s identity as an urbane, successful member of the cultural elite is part of his downfall. The urban-rural divide separates Toni from his Aunt Milka and her worries. He takes things too lightly.

Meanwhile, there are many other things happening, a bank crash, his partner’s career as an actress seems to be taking off and Toni, all too much on the surface, allows his life to spin out of control.

The title, recalls the wonderful Graham Greene comic masterpiece, Our Man in Havana and set certain expectations. Our Man in Iraq was certainly bitterly funny and often very witty. It, too, is a social commentary and one about a country we seldom get to see from an insider’s view point.

3pawsOur Man in Iraq is a good book, worth reading and it offers a new perspective that we have few chances to see. However, even though the book was quite short and was well-written, I was eager to be done with it. I do not have to love the characters in the books I read, but I do have to care about them and I really did not care that much about Toni.

Ivan says

FIRST LINE REVIEW: "Iraky peopl, Iraky peopl." Such a strange, comic novel coming out of Croatia, set at

the time of the Iraq War. Just plain quirky, with huge dollops of human insight and pathos. A quick read to one of my favorite countries.

Irena Govedarica says

Periši?u, majstore!

Malcolm says

Toni, a journalist in Zagreb and inveterate slacker, seems unable to escape his family from the south, the consequences of the war, the effects of being driven to study economics when he really wanted to focus on literature and the impacts of a combination of a desire to be too cool for words, a profound sense of insecurity and an overblown sense of responsibility for the actions of others that have an impact on him. All this means that despite being the novel's main character, he does little to drive it and instead responds to external factors. The most potent of those external factors and therefore at the heart of this story is Boris, Toni's Arabic-speaking cousin and 'our [his newspaper's, on his recommendation] man in Iraq', but the impending collapse of a regional Croatian bank has major consequences.

The problem is that Boris is a major screw-up. He's not a journalist, seems to be suffering PTSD (as it seems do many men in this post-war Croatian fictional outing, including it seems Toni), writes bizarre, stream of consciousness emails to Toni that are reworked, by Toni, to be weekly news reports of the second Iraq War. Boris' disappearance brings his mother, Toni's aunt and the family matriarch at odds with Toni's (minority) branch into the mix just as Toni is suffering yet another bout of insecurity over 1) his job, 2) his friend's money making scheme, 3) his girlfriend's high profile success in the theatre, 4) the new guy at work and 5) pretty much everything else. If Boris is an obvious screw-up, Toni manages to hide his, for the most part, behind a self-deluding sense of cool..... Of course, it all goes wrong.

In short, this book is packed full of people so many of us in and around these cultural industries are likely to recognise as types, as people we know, or perhaps as ourselves. Along the way, Periši? does a great job at dragging us into Toni's world view so we see Markatovi?, the entrepreneurial friend, as slightly dodgy and continually on the make with several new schemes at any one time (until, that is, we start to work out why), Sanja (the girlfriend) as the ideal realtionship, until that is until we begin to realise just how much she has been putting up with and Milka, the matriarchal aunt, as a schemer (or highly distressed mother). Work relationships are a little less convincing, except that the types are more obvious and compelling drawn, with in some cases, such as Silva – the former model turned writer – embodying and inducing a sense of pathos. On top of this, Periši? manages to hold the things-are-going-OK line for a long time – even though the action, for the most part, takes place over five days, with an awful lot of flashback and contextualisation.

It's a great yarn – funny, tragic, sad, packed with pathos, despair and hope – with believable characters seen through the eyes of a narrator just the wrong side of holding it together making most other characters not quite right, but at times fully rational and acting coherently: Periši?'s skill in managing this complex persona is impressive.

It is also a social novel, a book about the effects of the war, of the collapse of Yugoslavian socialism but without much sense of Yugonostalgia, about new entrepreneurialism, globalising economic forces, celebrity

and fame, and a small Balkan state's place in the world all wrapped up in delightfully laconic prose with a well-developed sense of the absurd. It is fantastic to see publishing houses such as Istros and vbz (depending on edition and place of purchase) publishing this and books like it.

It's not exactly a beach or lying by the pool kind of novel, but it is thoroughly engaging and compelling, partly in a car-wreck kind of way but also in a rich and layered characters kind of way. Well worth a look.

Chris Hays says

This was a fascinating book. On one hand, I wanted to give it the 4 stars positive for its take on the multitude of subjects it tackled. On the other it was a struggle to keep up with the various philosophies. I think the writer did a great job of portraying the cynicism evident when one tries to help other and gets screwed over. There was also a great mantra into the idea of oneself importance in the world. However, on a whole the book left me feeling wrung out for no reason as if there was a lack of a climax or that some of the largest aspects of life were an after thought to the climax which happens 70% of the way through. I think it was deserving of the award on many levels and if I could that related to the protagonist, this would have been 4 stars. All in all it was not really my type of story.

Susanna says

Our Man in Iraq wasn't quite what I had expected, in that I anticipated more focus on the war in Iraq and less emphasis on the daily life of Toni, the narrator, who remains in Croatia. I didn't really connect with or get into the story until around 3/4 of the way through the novel. It seemed like Toni's situation, as well as Perisic's humor, would be more understandable to those who have first-hand experience with recent Croatian history and contemporary life. The more absurd Toni's troubles got, however, the more I began to see how this could be both a poignant and a funny read. I ended up greatly enjoying the last 50 pages, so perhaps one of these days I should go back to the beginning of the book and read it in that light to see if it's improved.

Disclaimer: I received my copy of this book through the First Look program in exchange for an honest review.

Zrinko Mršo says

skoro 5

Chik67 says

La sensazione è che questo libro, che cerca ombelicalmente tramite la narrazione di un uomo in caduta libera in una società in cui la arrampicata sociale è lo sport più praticato, sia invecchiato male. Balcani, guerra in Iraq, arrivismo. Forse letto dieci anni fa aveva un altro sapore. Oggi mostra i suoi limiti: una certa banalità di scrittura e di soluzioni narrative, una certa piattezza dei temi, uno eccessivo schiacciamento sull'attualità.

maria says

I give out five-star ratings sparingly, but I agree with Jonathan Franzen (who provided a cover blurb) that this is a brilliant novel. The novel portrays the hipsters of Zagreb in the newly hatched republic of Croatia, and shows how globalization and other cataclysmic changes affect social relations. Robert Perisic reveals himself to be a witty observer of the zeitgeist.

Doris Pandži? says

Nevjerojatno dobra knjiga. Ne znam zašto ovo nisam pro?itala prije.

World Literature Today says

"Depicting a generation raised in "strange Eastern European systems" who "placed too much hope in rock 'n' roll," this provocative satire explores both modern Croatia and its discontents and also, like Mother Courage, the human lust for power and money that still spawns war and suffering." - Michele Levy, North Carolina A&T University

This book was reviewed in the September 2013 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/1akotbp>

Jaimie Lau says

Pretty unexpected considering the title and what was promised by the blurb. The actual Iraqi war, correspondence and disappearance of Boris the "journalist" is pretty much background noise to a soap operasque array of actor/journalistic characters hanging around trendy places in Zagreb. Seemingly the focus is on the Western-style problems that affect the movers and shakers of Croatia after the shift from socialism to capitalism. The book actually gets quite funny when Boris's mother, Milka, kicks up a media storm over Toni's role in her son's disappearance but it really does take a long time to get to this point. Periši?'s writing style is incredibly readable and makes scenes of little consequence interesting to read.

Fran says

It was interesting to get a perspective on the aftermath of the Balkan wars, the discombobulating transition from communism to capitalism and the "need" to make Croatia significant in world events. I finally got engaged in about the last 50 pages when the superficial gloss on Toni, the lead character, fell away.

Sanja says

Ma teraj se, Periši?u.

Alessandro Speciale says

There are passages that make you think of a Jugoslav, post-1989 Dovlatov. But - for good or bad - things become much more serious: capitalism, it seems, is much more serious than socialism and irony isn't enough to find your way around it; the same goes for adult life and the choices it requires of all us, former rebels who've never made peace with being too adult for rebellion. As a consequence, for good or bad, the searing lightness of Dovlatov fades away in the second part of the book, making it more urgent and more uneven at the same time. A fascinating, complex read; highly rewarding
