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March 14, 2011

Author Earns Her Stripes on First Try

By CHARLES McGRATH

Téa Obreht is just 25, and “The Tiger’s Wife” is her first book. It is also the first book ever sold by her agent, Seth Fishman, who is 30, and the second book bought by her editor, Noah Eaker, who was 26 when he acquired it and, strictly speaking, still an editorial assistant.

“We were all very new,” Ms. Obreht said recently, “and we were excited to find each other.” They might want to consider retirement, quitting while they’re ahead, because the kind of good fortune they are enjoying right now may never come their way again.

Ms. Obreht was included in *The New Yorker’s* “20 Under 40” list of young fiction authors last summer and “The Tiger’s Wife” was previously excerpted in the magazine. On Sunday, the book [made the cover](#) of *The New York Times Book Review*. Just about everywhere, it has received the sort of reviews that many writers wait an entire career for. In *The Times* on Friday, Michiko Kakutani called it “[hugely ambitious, audaciously written.](#)”

Set in an unnamed Balkan country in the aftermath of a civil war, “The Tiger’s Wife” is narrated by a young physician named Natalia Stefanovic, whose beloved grandfather, also a doctor, has recently died. The story links her efforts in the present to deliver vaccines to children in an orphanage with elaborate folk tales her grandfather used to tell: one involves a deaf and mute woman, abused by her husband, who befriends an escaped tiger in the woods, and another is about a vampirelike character known as the Deathless Man, himself immortal, who brings death to others.

The book begins by describing the ritual visits the narrator and her grandfather made to the zoo when she was young, and in the middle of her book tour last week, Ms. Obreht, who used to visit the [zoo in Belgrade](#) with her own grandfather, stopped by the zoo in Central Park, one of her favorite places in New York. She pointed out that the snow leopard and the polar bears had much more space to roam here than they would in Belgrade.

“These big, open environments for the animals — that’s a very luxurious, American concept,” she said.

Until she was 7, Ms. Obreht lived in Belgrade with her mother; her grandfather, who was a Roman Catholic from Slovenia; and her grandmother, a Muslim from Bosnia. Her father was never in the picture, she said. In 1992, with civil war breaking out in the former Yugoslavia, the family moved first to Cyprus and then to Cairo, where Ms. Obreht, who already knew a little English from watching bootleg copies of Disney movies, went to English schools.

In 1997, when the war had ended, Ms. Obreht's grandparents moved back to their Belgrade apartment, but she and her mother emigrated to the United States, living outside Atlanta for a while before finally settling in Palo Alto, Calif. Ms. Obreht graduated from the University of Southern California and then got an M.F.A. at Cornell, where she began writing what would become "The Tiger's Wife."

Starting in Cyprus, she spent most of her spare time reading and writing, "to the point," she said, "of not being socialized properly." These days she is cheerful and gregarious, and recalled her childhood as a mostly happy one, but added: "I think I'm just starting to feel some of the repercussions. Moving every three or four years that way has made it extremely easy for me to leave people behind. I'm finding that when you get older and start to care about friends and mentors, you have to make an effort to stay connected."

Her novel is not autobiographical. Not only did Ms. Obreht not live through the war in the Balkans, but her grandfather was also a successful aviation engineer, not a physician, and though he was a great storyteller, the stories he told were not folk tales so much as embroideries and exaggerations of his everyday life.

"That was part of his culture," she explained. "When someone tells you a story, it's a project. There's a complex, deep undercurrent of vendettas and interesting narratives underlying even anything as simple as saying, 'I went out to get milk.'"

Her grandfather died unexpectedly in the spring of 2007, and a few months later Ms. Obreht began working on a short story about a tiger, a deaf-mute circus performer and a young boy.

"The story was a failure," she said, "but for some reason I wanted to stay with those characters, and eventually the little boy became the narrator's grandfather, and that changed everything. When I go back through my notes now, I can't find the place where that happened. I sometimes think the writing process is a state of total denial about what you're doing or your motivations for doing it."

She added: "Nothing in the plot is anything like what my grandfather told me, and yet the essence of our relationship is all there." She and her grandfather were so close, she explained, because he was a self-made man from a poor background who had spent his whole life working hard and providing for others.

"Do it right. Don't mess around. He really instilled that in me," she said. "The burden of obligation was massive, and then when I came along, he was able to indulge in the fun of raising a child."

Mr. Fishman signed up Ms. Obreht on the basis of just 60 pages of what would become "The Tiger's Wife." "I got about halfway through, and I was so excited I had to get up and walk around my chair," he recalled.

Mr. Eaker remembered reading the book-length manuscript one Friday while on jury duty and becoming so enthusiastic that he e-mailed his boss, Susan Kamil, now the publisher and editor in chief of Random House, and insisted that she read the manuscript over the weekend.

By the end of 2008, Ms. Obreht said, she and Mr. Eaker thought they were finished with the manuscript, but she wound up substantially rewriting it in 2009, after Mr. Fishman got her an assignment from Harper's Magazine that sent her to the Balkans to research an article on contemporary vampire lore.

"That was when I rediscovered Belgrade," she said. "I noticed changes in the city itself, in people's attitudes, and I got myself emotionally reconnected to the place and the culture in a way I needed to reshape the present-day story."

About the critical success of the book, she said: "I still haven't taken it all in. It already seems like such a long time from the moment when I said to myself, 'Somebody likes it, somebody bought it, and it's going to have a cover!' The other evening I gave a reading, and someone came up to me afterwards and said, 'The Deathless Man is my favorite character.' My immediate reaction was: how do you know about the Deathless Man? When you're writing, you're working on this private world that becomes more and more real to you, but it's still your own. And then to discover that suddenly other people can access it — in a way that really shocks me."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 16, 2011

An article on Tuesday about the early success of the young author Téa Obreht misidentified the work by her that The New Yorker included in its “20 Under 40” fiction issue last summer. It is “Blue Water Djinn” — not an excerpt of “The Tiger’s Wife,” which the magazine published in 2009.