

Someone Else's Conflict

Alison Layland

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SUMMARY

The boy looks up and sees the foreigner's rifle aimed at him. Why is this man here? This is not his conflict, it is not the boy's... it is hell.

Jay has been home for a long time, but the ghosts of Yugoslavia are still with him as he busks his way round the country.

Marilyn is fresh out of a controlling relationship and desperate to reassert her independence. The last thing she needs is to fall for an itinerant storyteller who has a strange relationship with the truth.

When young economic migrant Vinko enters their lives, the past catches up with the present and stories become reality. Murder and kidnap force them both to decide how much they can believe and what it is they really want.

The story contrasts the idyllic Yorkshire Dales setting with the gritty reality of Northern cities, set against a backdrop of the troubled times in 1990s Croatia.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Is Marilyn right to trust Jay? How much of what he tells her about himself do you believe or disbelieve by the end of the novel?
2. An important backdrop to the novel is the Croatian Homeland War, one of the conflicts in the Balkans following the break-up of Yugoslavia – the most recent major war to take place in Europe. How much did you know about it before reading the novel? Has it made you want to find out more?
3. How much do you think Vinko's upbringing justifies or excuses his way of life and actions in the novel? Did you find him a sympathetic character, and did your opinions change as you read?
4. Vinko's situation is fictional, but did his story affect the way you think about the problems facing economic migrants in the UK today?
5. Have you ever seen a storytelling performance on stage? How do you think storytelling relates to other performance arts such as theatre or musical concerts?
6. What do you think is the place of the stories Jay tells in the narrative? Did they enhance or detract from the novel for you? What do you think is their significance?
7. Conflicts are often caused, or perpetuated, by cycles of blame and revenge. Within the context of the novel, to what extent do you think Jay breaks this cycle?
8. Do you think the flashbacks to the war are an effective portrayal of the events in the past? Did you find it more or less effective than a straight narrative?
9. Imagine Jay and Vinko's case went to trial and you were on the jury. What would your verdict be? Would it differ from your personal opinion of the rights and wrongs of their actions?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Layland has told herself stories for as long as she can remember. She grew up in Bradford and, after living in various parts of England, finally settled in mid-Wales where she has been living with her husband and two children since 1997. After studying Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Trinity College, Cambridge, she pursued a career as a chartered surveyor before returning to her first love, languages, to become a freelance translator in 1995. She was Welsh Learner of the Year in 1999, and a couple of years later won the short story competition at the National Eisteddfod. Her published translations include the acclaimed novel *The Colour of Dawn* by Haitian author Yanick Lahens. As well as reading, she enjoys travel, all kinds of music, oral storytelling, dabbling in various crafts and walking.

USEFUL LINKS

Alison Layland: www.alayland.uk
Honno Press : www.honno.co.uk

PRONUNCIATION AND LANGUAGE

There are a number of Croatian names, words and phrases in the novel. Here is a brief guide to the pronunciation of characters and sounds that differ substantially from English:

- c always pronounced *ts* as in English *bits*
- č like English *ch*, as in *church*
- ć a slightly different *ch*, similar to the *t* in *picture* or *meet you*
- h pronounced as the *ch* in Scottish *loch* or Welsh *bach*
- i always pronounced as English *ee*, never *eye*
- j like English *y*
- r a rolled *r*, which can sometimes form a complete syllable (taking the place of a vowel)
- š like English *sh*, as in *ship*
- ž like the *s* in *leisure*

The language spoken in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia is effectively one, Serbo-Croat, with regional differences in vocabulary and structure similar in extent to those between British and American English. Since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the languages of each country have been considered distinct: Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Where there are any relevant differences, the language used in the novel is Croatian.

It should also be mentioned that the West Yorkshire town of Keighley is pronounced *Keeth-ley*.

STORYTELLING

Oral storytelling has a substantial part to play in the novel, and has been a great inspiration to the author over the years. If you want to find out more, the Society for Storytelling provides lots of information, including a list of storytelling clubs throughout the UK: www.sfs.org.uk

Two excellent storytelling festivals offer a vibrant experience with storytellers from all over the world – the annual Festival at the Edge, Much Wenlock, Shropshire: www.festivalattheedge.org.uk, and the biannual Beyond the Border, held in St Donats, South Wales: www.beyondtheborder.com

FURTHER READING

If you're interested in finding out more about Croatia, the Balkans and the conflict, the following is a selection of some of the books discovered in the course of the research for the novel.

Background to the conflict and the region

The Death of Yugoslavia by Laura Silber and Alan Little, based on the BBC documentary series of the same name

The Fall of Yugoslavia by Misha Glenny

The Impossible Country: A Journey Through the Last Days of Yugoslavia by Brian Hall, a warm, entertaining and insightful trip through Yugoslavia in the months immediately preceding the war

The Road to Kosovo: A Balkan Diary by Greg Campbell, a fascinating account of a journalist's journey through the region in the mid-1990s

Chernobyl Strawberries by Vesna Goldsworthy, the autobiography of a Serbian writer, broadcaster and academic that gives a warm, touching account of growing up in 1970s and 80s Yugoslavia