

interview

‘Do I deserve this success? I don’t know’

Tea Obreht’s family fled Belgrade when she was 7; now her debut novel is a sensation in the US. *Tim Teeman* hears her story

Many of Tea Obreht’s e-mails to her agent lately have simply read “Really???” as he sends notification of yet another literary OMG moment after the publication of her first novel, *The Tiger’s Wife*. Seemingly overnight the 25-year-old Obreht has become America’s hottest young literary star. One rave review earned the author the cover of *The New York Times*’s Sunday Book Review section. Then the lionised critic Michiko Kakutani passed her judgment: “Ms Obreht has not only made a precocious debut, but she has also written a richly textured and searing novel.”

The story, set in Yugoslavia, is a dense stew of past and present, myth and reality, and follows Natalia, a young doctor, on her search for the truth about her grandfather’s death while travelling with a colleague to deliver inoculations to an orphanage. Alongside this run two mythic stories set in the past: the first, told by Natalia, is set in 1941 after the bombing of Belgrade and is about a beautiful tiger’s mysterious relationship with a deaf-mute widow abused by her husband; the second is about a mysterious harbinger-of-death figure called the Deathless Man recalled in stories told to Natalia by her grandfather.

The genesis of *The Tiger’s Wife* was deeply personal. Obreht was raised by her mother, Maja, and maternal grandparents, first in Belgrade until she was 7, then, when civil war broke out in 1992, in Cyprus, Cairo and the US. Her grandmother was a Muslim, her grandfather a Roman Catholic, and Obreht says that each was comfortable with the other’s faith — ironic in light of the conflict that so bloodily consumed the former Yugoslavia. Obreht’s mother and grandparents decided to leave the country as war broke out to give Tea, already clearly able and intelligent, a better life. “Serbian education is good and Serbian intellect a great export, but it is an export,” Obreht says. “There’s not a lot of opportunity there. Also, the Balkan attitude is that you shield the child as much as you can. It doesn’t need to know any more than it needs to know. I didn’t have a problem uprooting, my mentality was it was a new adventure.”

Obreht was particularly close to her grandfather Stefan, an aviation engineer, to whom the book is dedicated. Her father “was never part of the picture”, her parents having separated when she was small. She claims to have no memory of him and never to have been curious about him: “My grand-

father was the paternal figure in my life, if you don’t have x, y or z you don’t know to miss it.”

Stefan told her the kinds of stories “which couldn’t have been true” that are woven into the more fantastical strands of *The Tiger’s Wife*, such as the occasion when he visited the palatial home of an Ethiopian official to find a pride of lions reclining on the porch. “Stefan was from Slovenia, but had Germanic roots and walked with a hunch, born of a hard-scrabble early life of working in a quarry carrying rocks. It was his deathbed request [that] I write under his name,” Obreht says, “and I am in the process of legally changing my surname [Bajraktarevic] because your name is your identity, and I feel Obreht is mine.”

Stefan and Obreht’s grandmother Zahida returned to Belgrade, where Stefan died on May 3, 2006 (the date is engraved on Obreht’s mind). “His death made me start writing *The Tiger’s Wife*,” she says simply. While the grandfather of the book isn’t “really” her grandfather and the character of Natalia not “really” Obreht (but more her best friend, who is a doctor), the book became a “coping mechanism”.

Her grandfather, who had colon cancer, asked her not to witness him die but to continue with her studies, “which became a big family conflict but I respected his wishes. Our last conversation was banal, he was heavily sedated. I wanted to be there but I’m glad I wasn’t. I was able to avoid the finality of it for a while. It took me about a year to come to terms with the fact he would never pick up the phone when I called Belgrade. I was asking myself: ‘Where had he gone? Is death the end?’ It also brought up, 100 per cent, my own mortality. Writing the book extended my time with him and helped put my gut-wrenching and obsessions on to the page.”

Obreht feels calmer now — the character of the Deathless Man goes from sinister to reassuring, which measures the shift in her mood — but on her annual visit to Belgrade she now cleans the family crypt alone, which she and her grandfather used to do together, “which is weird now he’s inside it”. She occasionally sees him in her dreams, “but the conversation is just, ‘Oh it’s you. I think writing this has preserved him’”.

Obreht’s success isn’t completely overnight. Last year *The New Yorker* published one of Obreht’s short stories and named her the youngest of its “20 under 40” writers, but even so the reaction to *The Tiger’s Wife* has taken her aback “in the nicest possible way”, she smiles, and Obreht is now on a head-spinning cross-country tour.

“I am loving it,” she says, “although it’s been difficult to process.” Her Balkan background makes her “very superstitious, and I worry it could be taken away from me”. Today, in a bar in Syracuse, upstate New York, the nearest significant city to Cornell University, where she studied creative writing until 2009 and where she still lives, Obreht is softly pretty and modest rather than the enigmatic blonde bombshell of her dustjacket photograph. “The most jolting thing,” she says, “is readers having opinions and talking about characters who



EASY, TIGER Tea Obreht, 25, says that she is taken aback by the praise lavished on her novel, set in her native Balkans

were mine in private for so long. It’s like other parents, strangers, suddenly talking to you because you have a child. You feel like saying: ‘How did you come by this information?’”

Her identity is both Balkan and American, she says: she still touches wood, “and I never tell anyone they have a beautiful baby because when I grew up if you said that, the Devil would come and take it away”. As *The Tiger’s Wife* makes obvious, Obreht loved going to the zoo in Belgrade, “being held up on the railings of the carnivore wing”. A tiger really did escape from Belgrade Zoo during the 1941 bombing, and after Nato bombs fell in 1999 a traumatised tiger began to eat its own legs, an episode that features in Obreht’s novel. More recently, in Syracuse, Obreht observed tigers “at their happiest” in the snow. In Cairo she and Stefan would see the mum-

mies unveiled in their tombs, “and it was only later I realised ‘That was a real body.’”

She was an early fan of ghost stories, from being transfixed by the Disney version of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* to (as an adult) Guillermo del Toro’s *The Orphanage*, crying so much that she thinks her friends “will never invite me to scary-movie night again”. She doesn’t believe in ghosts so much as “the myth of ghosts”, as *The Tiger’s Wife* illustrates. “I went to Salem recently, and the legacy of the witch-hunts is tangible in the desire of people who live there today to atone for what happened all those years ago.”

Obreht has always been private and introspective, happy to play, read, draw or create stories by herself from a young age. “There’s this image of the sad and pathetic only child, but that wasn’t me,” she laughs. She had friends — “and I have friends. I go

out, have girls’ nights, all that” — but was happily “self-engaged” for much of her young life. She was inspired by Gothic writers such as Poe and Hawthorne as well as Isak Dinesen (aka Karen Blixen), Hemingway (for his short stories), Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*) and Victor Hugo (she still has her childhood copy of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). *The Jungle Book*, which features in *The Tiger’s Wife*, was also read to her. “I always wanted to write, apart from a period as a teenager when I thought about being a zoologist. Even then I imagined writing in a tent [and] tagging wildebeest on the side.”

Obreht was “an obnoxious teenager”, she admits, going out late, “but never drinking or doing drugs”. Her grandfather once saw her in a friend’s car when she shouldn’t have been. “I didn’t fear him but I feared his disapproval. His attitude was very much,

“You have this opportunity to excel, don’t waste it or screw it up.” In 2000 her mother remarried and Obreht got a baby brother, Alex, who, when she took him out in his pram, other women assumed was hers. A writing class at the University of Southern California in 2005 “completely got me, I learnt how you structure a book”.

Despite its freighted present-day setting, Obreht’s novel doesn’t use real names for towns. “I wanted to write a human story without a political inventory,” she says. So there is no political symbolism in the tiger? “No. If people want to read it that way, fine, but the tiger is just a tiger, although allegory and myth are used by all kinds of cultures for making sense of difficult times, including war and conflict. The book is about fear and ignorance, and also childhood and how children conceptualise death.” A trip to Yugoslavia to research vampirism for a magazine article helped to hone the dialect

‘The Balkan attitude is that you shield the child. It doesn’t need to know any more than it needs to know’

and her understanding of how “shame and guilt inform gossip in communities”. She is optimistic for the future for her home country. “I think the younger generations just want to move on.”

The Tiger’s Wife took Obreht three years to write from the seed of a very different short story, living the kind of writer’s life that meant visiting her grocery store at 2am for “limp lettuce and not a lot of bananas”. “I’m very hard on myself,” she says. “I don’t like putting anything out there that I’m not 100 per cent happy with. I write sentence to sentence. I’m aware of the pressure already around my next novel” — also to be set in Yugoslavia, “but a radical departure” — “I don’t think I’ll get overwhelmed and get writer’s block. My problem is the pressure I put on myself. Other writers have said it’s important to be deep into writing your second novel. I don’t feel I am yet.”

Happy in her relationship with another Cornell writer, who she declines to name, marriage and children are still far off: “I have dated writers and it can be a nightmare, but not this time. He’s very supportive.” She is “excited to be doing all I wanted to do” and, just as she was as a child, she is “still a nomad. I’ve been at Cornell for five years and I’m getting itchy feet”. She is planning a move to New York.

Surely Obreht’s former classmates must be envious of her success. “They’ve been overwhelmingly generous,” Obreht insists, “although I have had people at conferences ask me, ‘Do you think you deserve this?’ My response is ‘I don’t know.’”

***The Tiger’s Wife* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson at £12.99. To order it for £9.99 inc p&p call 0845 2712134 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop**

Looking for love in Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor, laureate of small-town America, has turned his hand to poetry. He talks to *Erica Wagner* about pleasing his women, facing his critics, and retiring

Garrison Keillor is a nice guy. How nice? Over the course of our very English lunch in Piccadilly, Central London — I am happy to be the provider of Mr Keillor’s first fish pie — we get to talking about a review of *Good Poems*, an anthology of poems compiled by Keillor, which the American poet August Kleinzahler penned for *Poetry* magazine in 2004. It’s a piece of startling aggression, even to the eyes of a hardened critic like me. Kleinzahler uses words such as “execrable” and refers to Keillor’s “appalling taste”, and when he does admit that some poems in the book are really quite good, he figures that this means that someone other than Keillor must have chosen them. I can’t understand what was bothering him so much, I say.

“I don’t think he understood,” Keillor says gently, in that voice which — if you have been listening to his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, for decades, as I have — is peculiarly, eerily familiar. I’ve spent hours cooking, cleaning, driving, you name it, with Keillor speaking softly into my ear, and now he’s sitting across from me. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that I’ll have to answer back. I’m so used to the one-way traffic of radio. “He clearly had an honest, visceral dislike of the book, and maybe he misunderstood; perhaps he imagined that I was putting these poems forward as the ‘best’ American poems of a particular time, and of course I was not.” The anthology arose — and continues to arise, the latest volume, *Good Poems, American Places*, having just been published in the US — out of another broadcast, *The Writer’s*

Almanac, a daily, five-minute 7am show on which Keillor reads a poem. The poems chosen, Keillor explains, need to be able to be read on air, early in the morning: “You assume you are speaking to busy people.” He shrugs, his serious eyes behind their big, round glasses blinking slowly. “The world of poetry is extremely decorous, so that gentleman, Mr Kleinzahler’s...” he searches for the word, “screed got an enormous amount of attention. But I believe in vigorous free speech. Does not damage whatsoever that I can see.” And then the kicker. “Bless his heart. I wish him well.”

It’s not a surprise, of course, to find Keillor as thoughtful in person as he is on air. His creation, Lake Wobegon — based on the small town in Minnesota where he grew up — is the place where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average”. It has been fodder not only for the airwaves (the show has been going since 1974) but for a sequence of novels in which Keillor combines his acute observational skills, down-home empathy and unscary erudition to great — and bestselling — effect. But he and I have met because he has now dipped his very own sneaker-clad toe (he’s

‘I was terribly hurt that my first wife never remarried. I was enormously relieved that my second did’



To hear Garrison Keillor reading his own poems go to thetimes.co.uk/books

RETIRING TYPE Garrison Keillor will be 70 when he quits his radio show

pretty much always in sneakers, with a smart suit on his 6ft 3in frame) into that decorous world of poetry; his *77 Love Sonnets* (complete with CDs of the poems read, and sometimes sung, by the author) has just been released into the world.

It’s a delightful volume, consisting, in the main, of love poems that rhyme and scan and are written in homage to the women he has loved throughout his life. There have been a few of them. He’s in London with his wife, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and their 13-year-old daughter, Maia, but it’s worth remarking that Nilsson, a concert violinist, is wife No 3. All has not been entirely smooth, romantically speaking, in Lake Wobegon, and part of what’s striking about this slim volume is its honesty about the author’s trials. “I still flee/ From dumb boredom. I endure dramatic revisions/ Sudden departures, divorce, and now I see/ The fugitive is imprisoned by the fear of prison,” he writes in *Miami Sonnet*. This trip he finds himself staying at Claridge’s, the choice of his wife;

as he says to me, “This is a man’s job, to provide pleasure to women.”

And this is a generous book — you have only to look at the poem entitled *To Her Next Lover* to feel that. “Well, a person does not want the loved one to languish and lie on a fainting couch and listen to sad songs,” he says when we speak of this poem. “I just can’t imagine it.” He pauses. “I was terribly hurt that my first wife never remarried,” he says. “I was enormously relieved when my second wife did.” This comes early in our conversation; and for all I expected him to be forthright, his candour stops my soup spoon on its way to my mouth. Mary, his first wife, was the mother of his son, Jason, who works as a producer on *A Prairie Home Companion*; she died in 1998. His second wife, Ulla Skaerved, was an exchange student from Denmark when Keillor was at high school; they met again at a reunion in 1983 and their marriage lasted five years. Of Ulla, he says: “A woman who I’d lived with for years, and then we broke up... of course it’s painful,

but she found somebody else and she’s been married to him now for 20 years. How can one not be pleased about that?” But your first wife didn’t remarry? “She didn’t,” he says with genuine sadness. “And then when she died, the grief that I felt for somebody I hadn’t been much in touch with... I’m sure some of it was guilt, but I’ve never felt grief like that. It was completely astonishing. I wished I could have written a poem about it; I didn’t know how to write one that would not have seemed self-serving.”

For the record, Keillor’s keen for you to start writing poems, too. “If you can do a crossword puzzle, you can write a sonnet,” he says. He is acutely aware that the 21st-century world of e-mail and Twitter has an increasingly transitory, fleeting feeling and is keen that we all battle against it, especially in matters of the heart. “If you love somebody, if you are inflamed by passion for somebody — we think of that as transitory, but you don’t when you are in the midst of it. You think of it as enormous and permanent and set in stone. And you should record it at a time when it feels permanent to you. And if you simply write it down on a piece of paper with a pencil it will last longer than e-mail.”

One thing that has certainly seemed permanent and set in stone is Keillor’s presence on public radio; but shortly before we meet he makes the startling announcement that he will be retiring in two years’ time. You could hear the collective “Oh, no!” across the United States. *APHC* is not a niche programme: its audience is bigger than David Letterman’s, bigger than Conan O’Brien’s. (In the UK you can listen to it online or download the podcast; it’s also on Radio 4 Extra.) Four million people listen in every week. It’s a real variety show, but Keillor is its heart and soul. It’s nearly impossible to imagine that it will go on without him; but he is determined that it shall. I ask him if he will miss it. “I don’t think so,” he says, managing to surprise me again. “I don’t think so,” he repeats for emphasis. “I’ll be 70, for crying out loud. That’s a serious age. It’s long enough. But I need people in place to

carry on the show; I don’t want to hold it up. There are people who doubt that this can be done.” That, I imagine, is a serious understatement. “They’re trying to be flattering, and that’s very pleasant, but I would be terribly disappointed if this took a dive because it’s a useful show and it does some good. It does some good for radio, for acoustic music, for its audience. And so I don’t want it to shut down. You know that it would go into reruns for a couple of years, and then that would be it. And I think that’s awful.”

It is hard to think who could replace him. In his search for a new host he’s steering clear of comedians, for the most part: “I’m just not into jokes about Charlie Sheen,” he says to express his despair at the state of American comedy. “Good-hearted comedy is in short supply.” A musician, he thinks, would be best.

He has at least three books in mind; it’s not as if he won’t have plenty to occupy him. I want to wish him the best of luck with the hunt for his replacement, but I wonder if I’d listen to the show with anyone else at the helm. Well, Keillor would want me to be optimistic, and so, in tribute to him, I shall. Speaking to him, I’m reminded of something Jeannette Winterson said to me years ago: that we have to do good in the world, whatever that means to us. Keillor wants to do good in the world. (He is the first person I’ve ever interviewed, for instance, who hands me someone else’s book: a volume of poems by Jim Harrison.) When we leave the restaurant and head out into the London rain, he puts his big hand on my shoulder as we say farewell; a gesture that I can only describe as kindly, an old-fashioned word that suits him well.

Kindness, anyway, is the best revenge. He has included one of Kleinzahler’s poems in the new anthology that he is preparing now. Bless his heart. ***77 Love Sonnets* by Garrison Keillor is published by Bloodaxe, £12, and comes with two CDs. To order it for £10.80 inc p&p call 0845 2712134 prairiehome.publicradio.org writersalmanac.publicradio.org**