FICTION

Weathering the Long Siege of Sarajevo Alone, a Painter Keeps Painting

Priscilla Morris’s novel “Black Butterflies” makes the case for art in times of war.

By Bea Setton
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BLACK BUTTERFLIES, by Priscilla Morris

After receiving the prestigious Legion of Honor award from the French president Emmanuel Macron in 2023, the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare told an interviewer that literature “transformed” suffering “into a life force, a force which helped you survive and hold your head up and win out over dictatorship.”

Priscilla Morris affirms this response to the question of art’s value in times of war — particularly to those suffering most — in her debut novel, “Black Butterflies,” set during the first year of the siege of Sarajevo in 1992.

When we meet Zora, a celebrated artist in Yugoslavia, she feels she is “floundering at the midpoint of her life.” Instead of “spending long, blissful days in her studio” painting — she’s working on a large-scale canvas of an Ottoman bridge — she is overwhelmed by her duties as a university professor, wife, mother and daughter to an ailing mother.

When her husband, Franjo, takes Zora’s mother to stay with their adult daughter in England, Zora is left to work in peace. But her short period of productivity turns to despair when the Bosnian war begins in earnest, and she is forced to weather the siege alone.

Morris is a brilliant writer of place. Her Sarajevo is finely drawn, as vividly rendered as Naguib Mahfouz’s Cairo. Readers will feel themselves walking the cobbled streets of the old town, nodding to the grandfathers playing chess in the shade of Orthodox churches, the skyline broken by cathedral spires and Ottoman-era minarets, the curves of the mountains that cradle Sarajevo visible beyond.

Like the bridges Zora paints, Sarajevo too becomes a link between East and West, between the grand old Hapsburg buildings and the blocks of modern high-rises, where Zora lives alongside Serbs and Croats. Thick Bosnian coffee, baklava pastries wedged with walnuts and plum brandy are shared among neighbors, who now pool their dwindling resources in a joint struggle to survive. Early on, when the Yugoslav National Army arrives to protect the city, Zora hopefully wonders “why they’re needed here where everyone loves each other.” As the war drags on, her naïveté is replaced by defiance, as she continues to reject the nationalist fervor that is tearing her city apart.

If the war beyond the city walls — the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the geopolitical roots of the violence — remains faceless and abstract, its effects on those confined within are visceral. Waiting in line for water, Zora notices “a cluster of iridescent flies” gathering near her; their “tiny wings flash in the beating sun like a handful of blue and green sequins.” Through the fog of dehydration she begins to perceive what lies beneath: “A blown-off hand lies on the pavement among the rubbish and the broken glass. It’s drained of blood, and moving with maggots.”

Morris builds tension slowly, effectively. As the metaphorical bridges to the outside world are cut one by one — the airport, the phone lines, water, power — the claustrophobia increases, along with an awful suspense.

Among the barest necessities, Zora also clings desperately to her art: When she runs out of paper, she turns to the walls; when she runs out of paint, she uses the empty tubes to make metal sculptures. As the days under siege accumulate, so do her class sizes, the students “inspired by what they take to be a show of resistance. The thing is to carry on as if everything is normal. This is how they keep up their morale and show the men in the hills they have not been reduced to living like animals.”

This is a dark novel, but one that wrests beauty and hope out of suffering. It is a work of literature that transforms horror and violence into a life force.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES | By Priscilla Morris | Knopf | 275 pp. | $28