

## 2011 WINNER

### THE TIGER'S WIFE BY TÉA OBREHT

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Téa Obreht is the author of *The Tiger's Wife*, winner of the Orange Prize and a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Inland*. She was born in Belgrade, in the former Yugoslavia, in 1985 and has lived in the United States since the age of twelve. She currently lives in New York City.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

In a Balkan country mending from years of conflict, Natalia, a young doctor, arrives on a mission of mercy at an orphanage by the sea. By the time she and her lifelong friend Zóra begin to inoculate the children there, she feels age-old superstitions and secrets gathering everywhere around her.

But Natalia is also confronting a private, hurtful mystery of her own: the inexplicable circumstances surrounding her beloved grandfather's recent death. Grieving and searching for clues to her grandfather's final state of mind, she turns to the stories he told her when she was a child, including his own encounters over many years with "the deathless man," a vagabond who claimed to be immortal and appeared never to age.

Yet, the most extraordinary story of all is one that Natalia must discover for herself: that of a tiger who escapes from a nearby zoo, and of a deaf-mute girl who feeds it scraps of meat and becomes mythologised over time as The Tiger's Wife. By learning about this strange story in her grandfather's Balkan village, will she learn something she never knew about herself and her heritage?

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

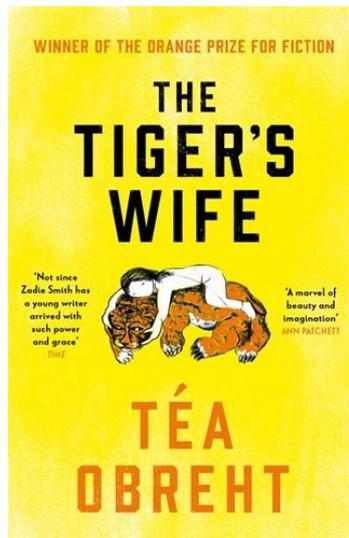
*The Tiger's Wife* has been classified as being a magical realist novel. It contains realistic portrayals of war, medicine and family, but incorporates seemingly supernatural characters such as the Deathless Man.

Yet, most of the 'supernatural' content occurs as part of the repetition of what is now a myth in Galina, so it might be said that the book is rather less magical realism, and more folktale.

In many ways, tigers are symbols of chaos and destruction in the novel: the villagers regard the tiger that takes up residence near Galina as a "devil". There is also a reference to Natalia's grandfather's copy of *The Jungle Book* which contains a famous tiger, Shere Khan, who is a murderous character. Yet, in Galina, the tiger offers the 'tiger's wife' – a vulnerable young girl – escape from brutal everyday conditions, and along with Obreht's imagery

depicting zoos as evil places, we are reminded that wild animals are not evil, unlike the structures which seek to imprison them.

Finally, Obreht herself described one of the themes in *The Tiger's Wife* as being, "a saga about doctors and their relationships to death throughout all these wars in the Balkans". Doctors are present after and during wars and conflicts, and represent the attempts of the people, culture and land to heal itself after great trauma. There is much in this remarkable novel about recovery and healing, both on an individual level and from a wider social perspective, as a region tries to heal itself after a traumatic division.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

The novel's central question could be said to be 'how do people respond to death?' and, in exploring the myth of *The Tiger's Wife* and the Deathless Man, Obreht seems to suggest that one of the ways we cope with the idea of death is by mythologising it. Natalia's search for meaning after her grandfather's death is a familiar one for anyone who has ever lost a loved one: the urge to know more about their lives, perhaps, and to remember them – but also to reject the apparent meaninglessness of death and attach some kind of significance to it, either with religion, art or stories.

How do people respond to death? How have you responded to it, or people you know? How perceptive or sympathetic do you think Tea Obreht is about how we process bereavement?

## QUESTIONS

What significance does the tiger have to the different characters in the novel: Natalia, her grandfather, the tiger's wife, the villagers?

Why do you think Natalia's grandfather's reaction to the tiger's appearance in the village was so different than the rest of the villagers?

*The Tiger's Wife* is seemingly inspired by the war in the Balkans, but doesn't specifically reference dates and places. Why do you think Obreht avoids those specificities?

The copy of *The Jungle Book* Natalia's grandfather always carries around in his coat pocket is not among the possessions she collects after his death. What do you think happens to it?



## NEXT STEPS

Natalia says that the key to her grandfather's life and death "lies between two stories: the story of the tiger's wife, and the story of the deathless man".

We all tell ourselves stories about our own lives, both framing the past in particular ways that may suit the way we live our lives now, and telling ourselves the stories of what we believe are likely to happen to us in the future. Those 'stories' pattern our lives, yet they are probably only versions of truth.

Especially when it comes to the past, the further we get from it, the more difficult it might be to know the truth. Examine one of your own early

memories. Write down as much detail as you can about it. If there is a particular feeling attached to the memory, note it, but then rewrite the memory with a different emotion attached to it. Write the sad memory as if it was happy, the happy as if it was sad, etc. If it's a memory of anticipation, make it about dread and vice versa. Keep the actual events true, as you remember them. How does doing this make you feel?

For something more in-depth, keep a memory diary. At regular intervals, write down one memory at a time

as fully as you can. Each time, challenge yourself to feel it and remember it as clearly as you can. Try and estimate your age at the time the event happened and note that down. You don't have to remember things in order, just one memory from any time, every time. In fact, it's interesting to observe what your strongest, most vivid memories are: they may be memories from childhood or something more recent and/or difficult that you are still processing. You might want to set aside a special notebook just for this purpose. In the process, do you find memories you thought you'd forgotten?

**“ TĒA OBREHT'S POWERS OF OBSERVATION AND HER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD ARE REMARKABLE. BY SKILFULLY SPINNING A SERIES OF MAGICAL TALES, SHE MANAGES TO BRING THE TRAGEDY OF CHRONIC BALKAN CONFLICT THUMPING INTO OUR FRONT ROOMS WITH A BITTERSWEET VIVACITY ”**

BETTANY HUGHES,  
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2011

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*INLAND* BY TEA OBREHT

*GIRL AT WAR* BY SARA NOVIC

*BOY, SNOW, BIRD* BY HELEN OYEYEMI