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## Josip Novakovich

**April Fool's Day**  
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**Q: In a radio interview you said of *April Fool's Day*, "I do recommend that as a way to read my novel; read the chapter headings and then put it aside and you'll think it's better than it is." Why?**

A: I was joking about that, but there's usually some truth in jokes. I had time to play with the chapter headings until I got them the way I wanted them. In a way, I wrote them the way one writes poetry, carefully choosing words, combining them and recombining them, until I got them to sound funny or at least playful.

**Q: Were you influenced by Voltaire's *Candide* when writing this novel? Depicting the Balkans in this tragicomic way seems preordained, but did you consider other narrative techniques and styles for this story?**

A: Not directly, although I read *Candide* a while back as a graduate student at Yale, as an example of philosophical writing, one that challenges Leibnitz's notion that ours was the best of all possible worlds. When Terry Karten, my editor, mentioned *Candide*, I was surprised to see how the notion fitted my novel, in which the somewhat naïve yet provocative protagonist first challenges the notion that socialism is the best of all possible political systems, and then later, that nationalism and the free-market economy are.

**Q: You've said that English is a "stepmother tongue" since you are not a native English speaker. How did you come to write in English? What is easy and what, if anything, is still tricky about the language?**

A: I began to write in English as a student at Vassar and then at Yale, where most of my education seemed to take place in the form of essay writing. Later, when I sat down to write stories, they came out in English. At first I didn't think that was right, but when I rewrote these stories in Croatian, they didn't sound as good. Somehow, it's easier for me to express myself quickly in English. That partly has to do with the nature of the language—when you look at a dozen parallel translations, the English text is nearly always the shortest. Just today, I was visiting friends of mine in St. Petersburg, Russia (where I am spending a few months), and our conversation took place half in English and half in Russian. My friend, a violinist, said that I sounded completely different when I spoke Russian, that even my body language was different, clearly showing my Yugoslav (Croatian) personality. When I spoke in English, I seemed to express myself like an American and even smiled more, seemed more extraverted. To me that seemed interesting—I guess different languages do carry different expressive possibilities, and I enjoy what English does for me: it makes me more communicative than I am in Croatian. Yes, I love this flexibility, as well as the apparent (and deceptive) simplicity of syntax in English. There are drawbacks, however—namely, coming to the language mostly in my twenties, I haven't acquired the ear for nuances in dialects and slang the way a native does, and so I feel a bit inhibited when writing dialogue. It doesn't mean that my dialogue is weaker than my exposition but I am more self-conscious when I write it than I am when I describe something.

Anyhow, I don't think that I am ever completely free of my native language. Some of the novel sounds like a translation—and it is a translation of culture, history, and mentality, and even of maneuvers in dialogue—but at the same time it's original English with the shadowy ghost of my native language. I think it's an advantage to have a foreign undertone and undertow, giving my current English a bit of a spin. I also think that if I were to write in Croatian again, my English would help me shape my native language in a clearer and more dynamic way than I would be able to do without the English influence. At one point I was thinking of moving back to Croatia and writing in Croatian again, but spending a few months in Zagreb disabused me of that ambition. I simply couldn't write there.

**Q: That verse from Isaiah in chapter 15 ("The earth is utterly broken down") is quite beautiful, but also stunningly apocalyptic. Your characters resolutely deny themselves the comforts, or the platitudes, of religion, but can we read that verse as a commentary or judgment of sorts?**

A: Though I quit going to church after a strict religious upbringing and many years of biblical reading and instruction I think it's a shame not to use that religious experience, and now and then I deliberately open the Bible and quote from it, to create a bit of a subtext, to lend the events some aura of the wisdom and the terrors of the last two or three millennia: The apocalyptic verses always fascinate me most, and in a war they seem quite apposite. And you are right about judgment—the judgment against the misdeeds of mankind leading to the horrors of war lurks there.

**Q: *April Fool's Day* displays a marvelous panoply of types of humor—scatological, irony, gallows humor, satire, etc. Is there any form of humor that doesn't amuse you, or that you find difficult to execute in your writing?**

A: I suppose punning, the kind of humor Lorrie Moore is so good at, is the sort I do the least of in the novel. I even indulge in slapstick, which I usually detest. Although I initially did have quite a few puns, I deleted most of them because they seemed too transparent—and when they didn't seem too transparent, they seemed too oblique. Anyway, some of them may have been good, but my self-consciousness got in the way; in humor, it's a vice to be self-conscious; my self-consciousness obliterated the opportunities for punning. Moreover, while writing in English, I was often aware of what many things in the novel—especially the dialogue—would sound like in Croatian. Ideally I would have written the novel in a mix of the two languages, but that would be a disaster. Who would understand me then? Only a few immigrants. I do believe that writing is a form of communication—I want everything I say to be understandable to most people; not necessarily low-brow or high-brow (or medium-brow?), but clear.