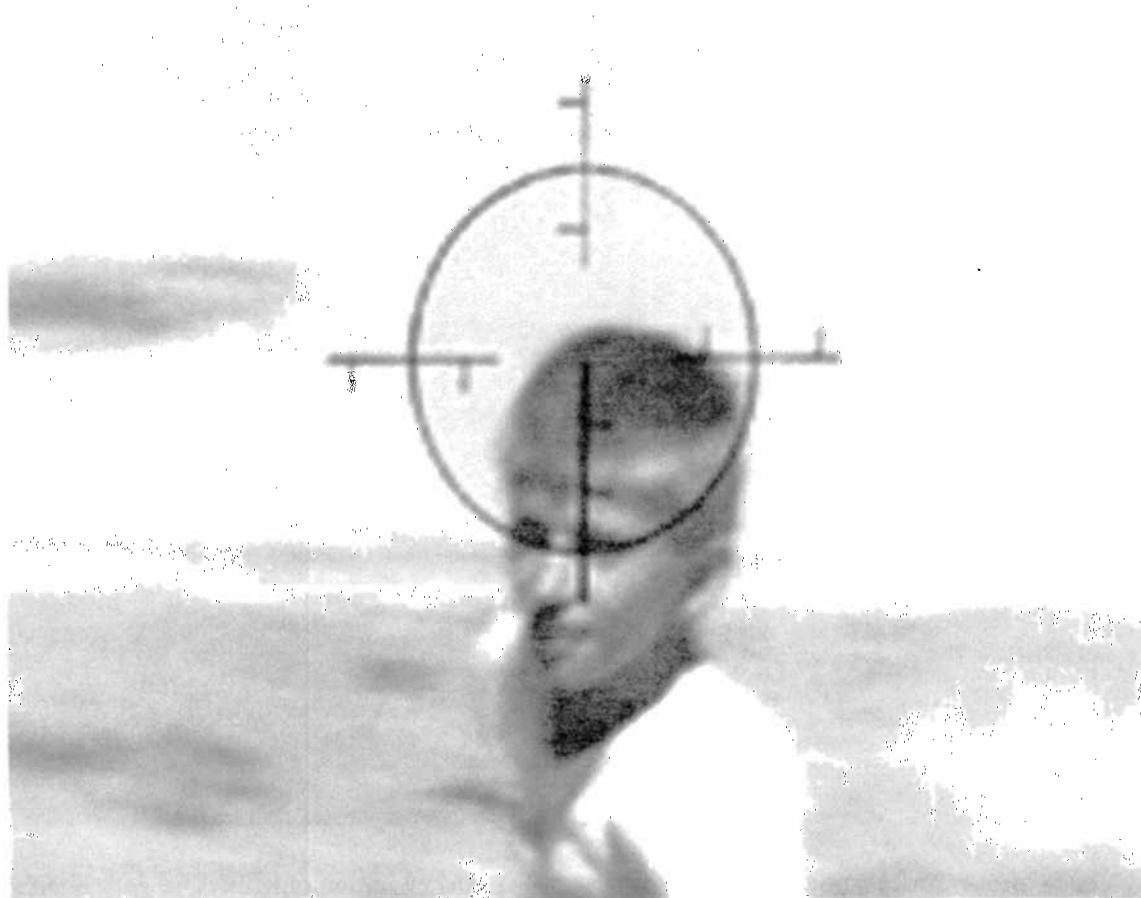


A Boy on the Run



Little Bastards in Summertime

By Katja Rudolf

New York: Steerforth Press, 2015, 400 pp., \$16.00, paperback

Reviewed by Kelly Cherry

It's an unfortunate title. A reader might assume the book is about small children. And there are small children in Part One, but, believe me, they grow up, and they grow up damaged and scarred. These are children whose childhoods were smashed to smithereens by war, leaving them precariously on the edge of adulthood.

Katja Rudolf herself was born in Sussex, England, and moved with her family to Canada when she was seven. She studied at King's College in Cambridge, focusing on the social and political sciences, and later took her doctorate at the University of Toronto. This is her first book but not its first edition; it was previously published in Turkey. It begins during the siege of Sarajevo. Did she spend time in Bosnia? Did she experience war firsthand? I don't know, but if she did not, her imagination is historically informed, dramatically inventive, and precisely detailed. *Little Bastards in Summertime* is a remarkable accomplishment; we feel that we are in it at every point. I was absorbed in her story to the point of feeling mesmerized.

The novel is written in the voice of young man, Jevrem Andric, the son of a Serb father and Croatian mother living in Sarajevo in 1992. But before we meet him, we meet his grandmother, his *Baka*, in 1942. Her father has planned a marriage for her, and to avoid it, she seeks out the partisans in

the mountain forests, eagerly joining them to build a new country under Tito. She carries a rifle. Attached to her belt is a grenade. She and her comrades build a railroad. They sing songs, sleep under the sky, and work hard. She finds a husband she can love and they work together. Her grandson Jevrem listens closely to her stories, attending to the energy and optimism behind them.

Jevrem's father is a journalist and essayist, his mother a well-known concert pianist. They live an intellectual life with their two sons and twin daughters until the siege of Sarajevo raises its ugly head. Jevrem's papa explains that nationalism is the cause of the fighting: "[T]hat's what nationalism does, it creates insiders and outsiders, enfranchised and disenfranchised." Serbs, Croats, and Muslims all play a role. Sarajevo, a European city once peaceful and prosperous, proud of the harmonious relations of its multicultural population, sinks into mud and horror. Citizens are prisoners in their homes. The city becomes a cross between a graveyard and a garbage pit, except that the dead and the ruined are still on view. Jevrem sees two small kids, friends of his, blasted by shelling.

People are called on to fight, which often means fighting their neighbors. Jevrem's family diminishes, and as it does, feelings of loss and grief flood and overwhelm him. Death is everywhere.

Jevrem and the family he has left are able, with the help of various agencies, to emigrate to Canada. He's a teenager now, who knows too much about how the world works: to him, it is a dogfight—but with humans. He is disaffected, with a teenager's disdain for the bourgeoisie, and is the leader of a band of thieves—the little bastards of the title—who break and enter with glee, delighted by how easy it is to terrify their victims and to get from them whatever they want. In Jevrem's basement bedroom, the little bastards smoke, toké, steal, and drink, though they are not exactly little. Jevrem is in love with Sava, one of his gang; she's tall and pretty, and carries herself with authority.

Jevrem's mother is working as a cleaning woman. A few people try to help Jevrem regain a sense of morality, or even enthusiasm, but neither they nor he understand that loss and grief are like huge boulders weighing him down. Nor does he realize that he has become hypervigilant, unable to rest. Sometimes he sees his papa or his brother, and sometimes they say something to him. After his beloved grandmother dies, Jevrem channels her voice, the way the living often do when loved ones die.

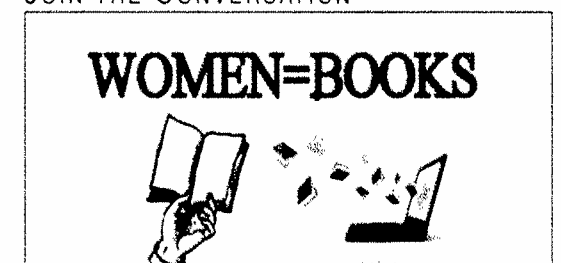
He stops stealing, and starts breaking and entering to provide poor people with what they need. He's a Robin Hood. The police find this strange but they arrest him anyway, and Jevrem is locked up in a residence for juvenile delinquents. Boys try to rape him; he has to prove he's tougher than they are. At last he escapes. Now he's on the loose, looking over his shoulder. He's headed to California, where he has an uncle.

A teenage boy on the run will remind some readers of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Salinger's protagonist Holden Caulfield flees his prep school and heads to New York City. And in fact, there clearly is a correspondence between these books—but Rudolf deals with more significant issues. Permeated by discussions about or riffs on communism, capitalism, and socialism—which the author manages to make integral to the story—*Little Bastards in Springtime* reminds us that *The Catcher in the Rye* was first published as a young adult book.

Little Bastards is wholly absorbing, terrifically exciting, thoughtful, informative, and clarifying. I would add that it is also immediate and propulsive. The characters are individual and dear, made so by Rudolf's penetrating eye and fearless ear. It has been a pleasure to review this book, and it is a pleasure to think that others will—*should, must, want to*—read it. 📖

Kelly Cherry is the author, most recently, of *Twelve Women in a Country Called America: Stories* (2015).

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