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Representations of Growing up in Wartime In the Contemporary Croatian Novel

The paper explores the issues of growing up in specific circumstances in Croatia in the first half of the 1990s – significantly those determined by the collapse of Yugoslavia, the war in newly formed Croatia and the neighbouring state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the large number of refugees and exiles from war-torn areas – as the thematic axis of a relevant number of contemporary Croatian novels. The study focuses on five novels: *Underground Barbie* [Sloboština Barbie, 2008] by Maša Kolanović; *The Hotel Tito* [Hotel Zagorje, 2010] by Ivana Simić Bodrožić; *In Late Summer* [U kasno ljeto, 2022] by Magdalena Blažević; *Cabbage Leafing* [Listanje kupusa, 2023] by Igor Beleš; and *The Croat Factory* [Tvornica Hrvata, 2023] by Nebojša Lujanović. These novels were not initially conceived as children's or young adult novels but function as a kind of mediation space between children's literature and adult literature (so-called crossover literature) due to certain characteristics – child protagonists, issues related to growing up, the context of the peer group, the relation between the world of youth and the world of adults, the questioning of associated socio-psychological phenomena (wartime trauma, hatred, violence, exclusion, political and economic transition, gender and class deprivation, etc.). The latter is confirmed by the inclusion of some of them in primary or secondary school lists of required reading (*The Hotel Tito* by Ivana Bodrožić). Through analytical examination of the motifs, themates, and concepts, and worldviews present in the selected novels, we observe the representation of growing up in a collision with the semantic, narrative, linguistic and stylistic aspects of their structure and establish the typology of several different models of growing up in the modern Croatian novel. Special attention is paid to the dimension of autobiography generated through the relationship of instances of author, narrator, and character, whereby the autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical nature of all novels is observed as their common structural feature. Also, in all the novels analysed here, war becomes a kind of platform for accelerated maturation and, at the same time, a site of implicit social criticism.

1. The theme of childhood and growing up in the contemporary Croatian novel

It is well known that, of all life periods, childhood is of crucial

importance for the entire life of an individual, mainly because of the direct influence of our early experiences on the development of personality in future life periods, on the processes of self-

realisation, and on future accomplishments in intellectual, emotional, and social spheres. This is undoubtedly one of the key reasons why the topic of childhood and growing up is common in literature and other arts, not only in works intended for children but also in works intended for adult recipients. However, it turns out that, in some socio-historical contexts, there is greater than usual interest in dealing with childhood, and this usually applies to precisely those socio-political environments in which childhood is threatened or in some way tested. In the book *A Shock Worker! Rebel? Consumer...* [Udarnik! Buntovnik? Potrošač..., Kolanović 2011], which deals with the relationship between the Croatian novel and popular culture, Maša Kolanović notes that confronting traumatic experiences in childhood is a frequent literary theme in the contemporary novel of post-Socialism, if we situate post-Socialism in the last decade of the twentieth century and the initial decade of the twenty-first century (Kolanović 2011: 27). Similar insights are presented by the literary historian Krešimir Nemec, who concludes that the 1990s in Croatia, marked as they were by war and processes of state independence from the former Federal Repub-

lic of Yugoslavia, had a great influence on Croatian writers, so they often resort to the topic of war and endangered existence, evoking their childhood or youth in literary worlds (Nemec 2003: 412). In other words, autobiographical literature of various types is quite common in contemporary Croatian prose and is produced, naturally, in connection with numerous themes of contemporary life, most often in the form of ominous portents, such as the themes of death, violence, addiction, social inequality, gender identities, transgenerational heritage, and others. Regardless of the specific genre or form in which it is present, it is evident that it serves as a fundamental driving force for much contemporary prose literature, both in Croatia and in other countries in the region.

One of the most important topics in the framework of the problem niche of contemporary reality is undoubtedly the topic of childhood and everything that it implies. Childhood is a common topic in children's and adult literature. We often find it – especially when it comes to questioning different aspects of growing up and maturing – in so-called young adult or teen literature. What seems even more intriguing – which was, at the same time, the key impetus for

this work – is the fact of an evident rise in the topic of childhood precisely in the contemporary Croatian novel not directly intended for children but primarily for adult readers. If we look deeper into the habitus of contemporary Croatian literature created in the new millennium, i.e., in the last 25 years that primarily addresses the adult recipient with its textual and para-textual segments and that is oriented to the topic of growing up, we come to at least 15 high-quality and notable novels, written mostly by renowned authors and published by well-known publishing companies. We list them here in chronological order: *Underground Barbie* [Sloboština Barbie, Kolanović 2001] by Maša Kolanović; *The Hotel Tito* [Hotel Zagorje, Bodrožić 2010] by Ivana Simić Bodrožić; *Farewell, Cowboy* [Adio, kauboju, Savičević Ivančević 2010] by Olja Savičević Ivančević; *Dark Mother Earth* [Črna mati zemla, Novak 2013] by Kristian Novak; *The Memory of the Forest* [Sjećanje šume, Karakaš 2016] by Damir Karakaš; *Anatomy of a Rat* [Anatomija štakora, Vidaić 2019] by Martina Vidaić; *Within Reach* [Nadohvat, Haler 2019] by Ena Katarina Haler; *The Swimmer* [Plivač, Prtenjača 2019] by Ivica Prtenjača; *A Big Deal* [Velika stvar, Gašpar

2020] by Mihaela Gašpar; *My Dowry* [Moja dota, Verde 2021] by Nora Verde; *Sons, Daughters* [Sinovi, kćeri, Bodrožić 2021] by Ivana Bodrožić; *Land Without a Sunset* [Zemlja bez sutona, Andrijašević 2021] by Marija Andrijašević; *In Late Summer* [U kasno ljeto, Blažević 2022] by Magdalena Blažević; *Cabbage Leafing* [Listanje kupusa, Beleš 2023] by Igor Beleš; *The Croat Factory* [Tvornica Hrvata, Lujanović 2023] by Nebojša Lujanović; and *The Innocent* [Nevini, Haler 2024] by Ena Katerina Haler. In most of the novels listed here, the problem of growing up is presented against the background of difficult, often traumatic experiences, such as those determined by war, other forms of the death and suffering of loved ones, or by different types of exclusion (social, emotional, gender) and results in various types of social criticism. Given that the focus of this paper is a more detailed examination of the presentation of wartime childhoods, their models of presentation, and the way they function in the context of the novel, we have focused our research exclusively on novels that explore growing up in the context of war, more precisely, on analysing five contemporary Croatian novels – *Underground Barbie* by Maša Kolanović; *The*

Hotel Tito by Ivana Bodrožić; *In Late Summer* by Magdalena Blažević; *Cabbage Leafing* by Igor Beleš; and *The Croat Factory* by Nebojša Lujanović.

2. Growing up and wartime

If we agree that war is an extremely unfavourable, often dramatic event that negatively affects both society as a whole and its micro-structures (families and individuals), it is clear why war has such a significant impact on a child's mental health and mental life (cf. Ullmann 1997; Kocijan-Hercigonja 1997). In the research article 'Croatian children's literature on war' ['Hrvatska dječja književnosti o ratu', Zima 2001], Dubravka Zima argues that it is possible to distinguish between two dominant narrative patterns in war prose in Croatian children's literature: the first depicts war as a period of maturation and concentrates on the children's experience of war, which is mainly the experience of horror and insecurity that war generates in children's lives, while the second presents war as an adventure relying on the image of war that adults tell children – simplified, schematised, and stylised events (Zima 2001: 84-85). These two approaches, as Zima points out, can be inter-

twined and even merged (Zima 2001: 84), and the entirety of Croatian children's war prose could be divided into two main thematic circles: prose about World War II and prose about the Croatian War of Independence in the early 1990s, the so-called Homeland War (Zima 2001: 83). Works that are not directly intended for children – although some of them eventually find recipients among such readers – are more complex and diverse due to the greater narrative-semantic complexity of such prose than those for children, and such titles tend to be under-researched. Therefore, this paper intends to examine the semantic and narrative-stylistic features – the so-called semantic and syntactic substructures (cf. Paleš 1999) – of these novels the events of which take place in the context of the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s and the literary discourses of which are not intended for children, but which have a child character at the centre of their novelistic world, with the intention of looking at deeper connections and possible presentation patterns that are established between the notions of war and growing up in a specific wartime context.

3. Representations of war in Croatian novels (for adults) with a child as the main character

3.1. *Underground Barbie* (2008) by Maša Kolanović

The novel *Underground Barbie*, through first-person singular narration from the perspective of an unnamed 12-year-old girl, depicts a childhood in the Zagreb neighbourhood of Slobodština in the early 1990s, at the time of the military aggression against Croatia by the Greater Serbian forces and the support provided to them by the Yugoslav People's Army. Although the socio-historical context presented inevitably points to the wartime situation in 1991, the focus of the narrative world is a group of children of pre-pubescent age (11–12), at a time when the central part of their children's world consists of playing every day with their Barbie dolls. What is most interesting in this novel and what constitutes its key difference from most other novels about wartime childhoods is that the war, along with the socio-political phenomena that accompany it, remains in the background of the novel. At the same time, in the foreground, children and their everyday

world are marked by play and typical children's problems. It is also interesting that the game – otherwise a key narrative figure in children's literature from its beginnings – is presented in atypical form: not as a traditional children's game (for example, groups of children playing outdoors), but as a game with Mattel's Barbie dolls, to date the most famous dolls in the world, whose sales flourished in the 1990s (Piche 2009; Rand 1995).¹ The dolls and their relationships created through everyday games of Slobodština children – which, due to air raids, sometimes take place in bomb shelters – also represent the transposed gender and class relations of the actual (Western) world, that is, they function as a kind of simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981) of reality, a kind of media and pop-cultural representation of the modern consumer world. Barbies and Kens – more precisely, their appearances, clothes, the relationships they make, the jobs they perform and the lifestyles they lead in children's games – function in the novel as a kind of *reality within reality*, as a kind of fictional obstacle course for creating entertain-

¹ In the book *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, Erica Rand says that in 1992, one Barbie doll was sold around the globe every two minutes (Rand 1995: 26–27).

ment and an emotional escape from serious wartime events for the young protagonists, but if we look at the novel's overall narrative-conceptual structure, then it can also be seen as a platform for ironising certain patterns of the capitalist world, i.e., a platform for social criticism. Of course, the latter will be fully visible to the adult reader, which is certainly one of the elements that legitimise Kolanović's novel as a novel for adults, i.e., a work for readers of appropriate social maturity to recognise specific socio-critical impulses, whether realised through humorous or ironic modes. Thus, the irony of the capitalist world's consumerist patterns and the overall focus on material goods and physical pleasures will be visible through the dolls' behaviour during various episodes in children's play with them. For example, when the most beautiful of the Barbies is to decide between two male suitors, she chooses the more attractive and affluent one, while the older and more unsightly suitor – presented in the form of an old, already ruined doll that the children call Dr. Kajfeš – is ridiculed and mocked:

No wonder Dea's Barbie was disgusted by Kajfeš. After all, could you imagine the life she would lead

with a man like that? She would inhabit a dismal valley of tears and suffering, subsisting on an assortment of disability and welfare benefits, whereas with Ana's Ken she could attain the life she had always coveted: heaps of plastic pearls and small items Made in Taiwan, China, Malaysia, or the Philippines, possessions that were an undeniable necessity for a modern women like Barbie. Plus, after the wedding, Ana's Ken had promised Dea's Barbie they would spend their honeymoon in the Bahamas. (Kolanović 2025: 54)

Humour and ease of storytelling, as well as a handful of pop-culture references (starting from music, movies, television series, popular computer games that at the time were beginning their expansion in the lives of children and teenagers all the way to popular fashion brands), jargon language varieties and English lexemes serve as important defining features of this novel, and make it distinct from other novels that evoke the war period. An important feature of *Underground Barbie* is the fact that not only do adults remain en-

tirely in the background of events, functioning as secondary elements in the children's world (and the world of dolls created in it by children), but also that the complex reality of war generally penetrates the children's world only partially – for example, through the media (their parents listen to television and radio shows, fragments of which reach the children), the situation of the arrival of new pupils, war refugees, in their classes, or the occasional sounds of air-raid sirens. In most cases, these irruptions of the reality of war are also presented from a casual, infantile perspective as the children of Zagreb did not have a real idea of war since the destruction was happening in other Croatian regions. That said, the social changes caused by the change of the ideological-political paradigm (transferring from Socialist Yugoslavia to the democratic, independent Republic of Croatia) are evident at every step and are also noticed by children (cf. Kolanović 2025: 10–11), 12-year-olds in Zagreb can still do what all children of that age do in peacetime – the daily life of socialising, playing, and school. So, for example, the children organise the so-called 'Barbie Refugee Ball' where, along with a number of popular tunes on the repertoire, there

are war songs of serious, mostly patriotic, and even combative tones that constantly aired in those days on radio and television stations (Kolanović 2025: 98–108). The city in which the child protagonists live, however, although often subject to air-raid alerts, largely remains beyond the reach of direct military destruction – the war for children in *Underground Barbie*, therefore, remains a relatively remote phenomenon that does not significantly interfere with their daily enjoyment of communal neighbourhood games, especially their favourite, the reality of which is more potent for children than any other, including the war – playing with Barbies. The simulacrum, therefore, has primacy over reality, and the play and enthusiasm it generates prevail over the sad and ugly signs of imminent war.

Although the name of the narrator, who is also the main character, is not explicitly stated – as such, the text does not directly establish the so-called autobiographical contract with the reader proposed by Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* (Lejeune 1975) – if the details in the story are connected (for example, a last name starting with the letter K, growing up in the neighbourhood of Soboština, age, etc.) with extra-

textual elements that the reader may (but does not have to) know about the author, we realise that this is (or might be) an autobiographical text. Namely, in the case where the name of the character in the text remains unexplicated, which is the most complex and challenging case when it comes to interpreting the autobiographical basis of the novel (cf. Lejeune, cited in: Milanja 1999: 215), it remains up to the reader's discretion and the information possessed to conclude either a so-called autobiographical contract, or a novelistic agreement, or to leave the interpretation unclear as to its autobiographical basis. In this case, the text will undoubtedly conclude a so-called referential agreement with the reader, which is the second iteration of Lejeune's conception, indicating that an autobiography (like a biography) is definitely a referential text, i.e., speaks of a reality, and as such allows the possibility of a kind of verification, even when its aim is not credibility, but similarity to the truth – it is, therefore, not an 'impression of the real' but 'an image of the real' (Lejeune, cited in: Milanja 1999: 226). Given the interrelationship of the three instances of the subject in the narrative text – the author, the narrator, and the character – which

is also the most important criterion for the verification of literary autobiographism, in *Underground Barbie*, there is, therefore, a balance between the so-called pure autobiographies and pseudo-autobiographies (cf. Kos Lajtman 2011: 86–93), precisely because the identity of the author and the narrator is not explicit. Thanks to the extra-textual elements (data from the biography of the author of the novel) and also the details mentioned within the text itself, it is more likely, however, that the reader will prefer to view the text as an autobiographical rather than a pseudo-autobiographical novel.

3.2. *The Hotel Tito* (2010) by Ivana Bodrožić²

Just like *Underground Barbie*, the novel *The Hotel Tito* is written in the first-person singular, from the perspective of a girl, a witness of the war in Croatia in the early 1990s. Unlike the somewhat older protagonist in *Underground Barbie*, the protag-

² At the time of publication of the original in Croatian, the author signed herself as Simić Bodrožić, but later she changed her surname (back) to Bodrožić. This surname is also listed on the English edition of the novel, so we will list it here in an updated form as well.

onist of this novel is still very young; more precisely, she is only nine years old when the war (and the novel) begins and does not understand exactly what is happening – for example, when she and her older brother, together with other children, are sent to the seaside to escape their native city of Vukovar, which is becoming a scene of conflict, the girl is not clear why the adults are crying and why they are upset (cf. Bodrožić 2010: 6).

The events are presented from an infantile, child-like perspective so the reader learns what a child of that age can know and understand.³ Through the plot development that follows the time spent as a refugee by the protagonist, her brother, and her mother over several years, the girl grows and matures, which also leads to changes in

perspective – her insights become more serious, more aware, and critical, i.e., the girl, later a teenager, gradually realises the complexity of the wartime reality, as well as the unenviable position that a refugee's life entails. While her father remained to defend the city, she, along with her mother and brother, changes places of residence, moving from one refugee shelter to another, constantly awaiting action regarding their right to housing, as well as the news of their father, who seems to have been captured and taken to a camp. In such suspense and social uncertainty, years pass: the protagonist finishes elementary school in Kumrovec (staying in Hotel Zagorje, which had been adapted to house refugees), and then secondary school in the Croatian capital Zagreb. At the end of the novel, she is almost a young woman; less than a decade has passed since the beginning of the war, but the traumatic family situation remains open since any relevant information about her missing father is still absent.

In addition to the most important problems that the protagonist faces growing up and which disrupt her existence – the search for her father and the wait for the housing to which her truncated family is entitled –

³ In the master's thesis *The Child in the Narrative Text: Child Subjectivity in the Context of Narratology and Stylistics* [Dijete u pripovjednom tekstu: dječja subjektivnost u kontekstu naratologije i stilistike, Koščak 2004] Nikola Koščak posits that the term *infantile narrator* can also be understood as a hyperonym, which, in addition to the child narrator, can include other narrative situations whose subject can in some aspect be recognised as infantile, including the so-called infantilised narrator in the case of narration where the narrator imitates the behaviour, communication, and speech of a child (Koščak 2004: 6).

during the novel, we follow several other problematic situations common to one's teenage years, such as falling in love, academic achievements, dating, and similar juvenile challenges. It is interesting that the limited child's perspective, clearly visible at the beginning of the novel, later changes not only in terms of the maturation of the protagonist – which is logical and expected – but also, in some places, by producing a real clash when the perspective of the child or teenager intertwines with that of the adult narrator – something which has already been noted in critical literature (Milanko 2010: 9; Brkljačić 2019: 12). Furthermore, as the girl matures and understands more, elements of social criticism become more pronounced – starting from the inefficiency of state institutions, especially those from which the family expects help in the search for their father and in solving their housing issue, through the criticism of the residents of Zagreb and Zagorje who generally have no understanding for the exiled citizens, to the later more subtle criticism of the school system, media, and politicians when the protagonist reaches secondary school age. It is clear, therefore, that war affects her personal life and her resentment of the system (cf. Postnikov

2010). For example, when her older brother sends successive letters to the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, asking them to help solve the housing issue facing them as war refugees who have also lost their father, the narrator comments with disappointment: 'I wonder whether he's writing this for himself, or Mama, or if he really thinks they're still reading our letters' (Bodrožić 2017: 139).

Although the dominant narration in *The Hotel Tito* is linear, the narrator's voice occasionally returns to the past and sometimes rushes to the future, offering the reader information about future events that the young narrator did not yet have, nor could have, in that moment. For example, information is given about the future death of some acquaintances: 'After a few years, old lady Pundjara came down with cancer and died, so she never lived long enough to go back to Vukovar. They buried her in Zagorje, on the little hill, and she had no family of her own to take back her bones' (Bodrožić 2017: 41).

As in *Underground Barbie*, in this novel, the protagonist and narrator remain unnamed, although based on knowledge of the author's life (her birth and life in Vukovar until the beginning of the war, going into exile

with her mother and brother, searching for her father, etc.), the reader can quickly establish links between the autobiographical reality of the author's life and the novelistic reality. Also, some quite concrete motifs from the world of the novel are consistent with the documentary data from the author's life, including the initials of the main character's name, which is undoubtedly the key element by which the text legitimises its autobiographical nature: 'He had a brother, I., and married wife A. who bore him two sons, J. 1975 and I. 1982. [...] That was all that was known about my father, and there I was, the second "son": I. 1982' (Bodrožić 2017: 63).

3.3. *In Late Summer* by Magdalena Blažević

The narrator of *In Late Summer*, Ivana, is a girl from Central Bosnia who faces growing up in wartime and is eventually killed in August 1993 in the massacre of civilian rural population by an enemy military unit. Although there are no precise locations in the novel, nor is the war presented through documentary details, the sentence that stands in the dedication of the novel – 'To the residents of Kiseljak, in memory of 16 August 1993'

(Blažević 2025: 5) – allows us to place the plot in central Bosnia, where in August 1993 Bosnian-Muslim military forces committed a massacre against the Croat population in the town of Kiseljak near Žepče. In the first chapter, Ivana's voice leads the reader into a room where a seven-year-old girl (herself) and her doll lie, and explains her feelings for the doll, her family members, her daily habits, and presents a situation in which the girl begins to choke on hard candy. The narrator's voice, however, reveals to the reader the most important information of the novel: 'This isn't the end. It can't be. I've got another seven years of life ahead of me' (Blažević 2025: 12). At the beginning, therefore, the reader receives the information that the girl has only seven years left to live and that the whole introductory chapter can be understood as the voice of the dead Ivana – her spirit, in a way – who recalls her early childhood. The last sentence of the opening chapter reads: 'My name is Ivana. I lived for fourteen summers, and this is the story of my last' (Blažević 2025: 16).

Therefore, the bulk of the novel deals precisely with the last months of 14-year-old Ivana in a rural Bosnian environment. The girl and her cousin Dunja, de-

spite the war that rages around, spend seemingly ordinary youthful days in a modest, scarce rural environment. They carry water from a nearby spring, pick apples in the garden, and ride bikes in the deserted village. The girls live their early teenage days in the shelter of nature, with domestic and wild animals and plants in the garden and in the fields and woods nearby.⁴ The narrator pays special attention to the presentation of the state of nature, the slightest changes in the plant world, and an atmosphere of special tenderness that emerges from the overall organic and inorganic world that contextualises the human world with which it seems to be in counterpoint. This 'breathing of nature' is captured in a distinctly lyrical way, with a richness of detail and sensory imagery that brings the novel closer to lyrical prose.

If you look around you, you'll see that the village was deserted a long time ago. Gates padlocked on both sides of the road. Ivy and tiny rose vines have made their way around the iron railings. The hiss-

⁴ For example, they catch pond terrapins and later release them back into nature.

ing of vipers and adders, and green lizards among the lush weeds in the gardens, sunbaking on the concrete along the houses as if on a hot pebbly beach. Disintegrating ribbons for tying up plants hang from stakes in the gardens. On patios, tables with nailed-down plastic tablecloths are covered in smooth black ink, and buried under leaves and twigs.

Drip, drip, drip, drip...

The roofs of the abandoned houses drip, caved in by rain and snow. The drops drum, tap until the roof tiles move apart; bird nests in the cracks. (Blažević 2025: 23)

However, a change occurs in the life of Ivana and her family – namely, her mother, father, older brother, and grandparents – when, for safety, they are forced to leave their house and move across the Bosna River to another village where their great-aunt lives. Other villagers, along with cattle and domestic animals, leave in a caravan headed by tractors loaded with older women and children. The life that follows is marked by scarcity,

cramped space, and daily danger. However, despite poor material conditions and uncertainty, the children manage to find joy in small, ordinary things – in pets, the occasional hard caramel, or jumping over a bonfire in the meadow. We can say that the depiction of children and childhood here is more or less in line with the so-called Apollonian image of the child, where the child is presented as an almost entirely innocent and good being, almost angelic (cf. Jenks 2005). Such an essentially archetypal depiction of childhood is suddenly interrupted by an unfortunate event – the incursion of enemy troops into the village and Ivana's murder before her mother and brother's eyes. This murder is depicted stylistically – without concretisation; the war is generally not portrayed in a documentary manner in this novel, but symbolically, in counterpoint to the modesty of the village and the innocence of children. Its key symbol is the anonymous soldier who kills Ivana. The narrator calls him by the symbolic name of Death and points out his youth, the fact that he was almost still a child, establishing a connection with her own brother, who was 16 years old at the moment of the intrusion of the military unit and the cruel murder of civilian

residents, including herself, and who is extremely shaken by the tragic end of his sister's life, which he had to witness:

Spilt blood never
cools. My brother was
kneeling in a puddle of
blood next to me, but not
touching me. His hands
are shaking as if they've
just been lashed by a
switch. He tries to lower
them to my face. Can
stuck eyes be closed? They
still shine like marbles
turned towards
the sun. (Blažević 2025:
113)

Everything in the novel *In Late Summer* is presented in a very refined, poetic style, including the very moment of the death of a 14-year-old girl after an enemy soldier has shot her in the chest:

I was hit by one spark. Di-
rectly in the heart. Mother
hears me calling her.
Mummy! Mummy!
Softly, like the tenderest of
songs. She doesn't know
that I'm shouting.
You'll go deaf from my
screams!
They flood the forest and
the fields.
Can you hear them?

They're in the flapping of bird wings, in the wind howling through open windows, in the creaking of wood underfoot, in the clanging of metal. (Blažević 2025: 105)

It is as if the gentleness and subtlety of events in nature constantly counteract the callousness and aggressiveness of the human world. We can say that this is a kind of poetic realism through which the concrete space-time of central Bosnia in 1993 transforms into a kind of archetypal temporal space of war in the face of whose cruelty the most fragile and innocent suffer: children and animals. The narrator will thus show in a very moving scene how the soldier who shot Ivana, only a few minutes earlier, in an aggressive raid on their house and yard, throws a box with newly hatched chickens into the air and then tramples each chick individually with his boot:

The black boot sends the box with the chicks flying into the air, high up, all the way to the roof. Like Dunja and I leaping over the bonfires. Yellow flakes in the air. He stomps on them, one by one. He transforms them into yel-

low-red star-shaped flowers. (Blažević 2025: 102)

What is, however, the most interesting in this novel and what makes its key difference from other Croatian novels about growing up in wartime is the narrator herself and her narrative position. Namely, Ivana not only narrates until the moment of her death but continues to narrate even after the cruel murder as a kind of omniscient spirit storyteller whose eye sees and knows everything. In other words, when Ivana narrates after death, it is not through the so-called internal focalisation that is derived from the character's vision but rather the so-called 'zero focalisation' (cf. Genette 1980), where the narrator knows more than the character knows or can know. Thus, for example, the dead Ivana will not only know what some of her fellow people are doing but also what they think and see at a particular moment. For example, she knows what her grieving mother saw immediately after her daughter's murder: 'One moment, Mother sees a bit of sky, my brother's sweaty face and closed eyes, and the next everything goes black before her eyes and her body completely gives way' (Blažević 2025: 113).

Unlike the previous novels, here, because of the name that is different from the author's, we do not need to directly relate the main character to the author herself and interpret the novel as autobiographical. However, if we are privy to certain specific information from the author's life, primarily that she grew up in Bosnia in the 1990s in the same part of the country (she was born in Žepče in 1982), the conclusion is that the circumstances and experience of war-time childhood that she acquired then (regardless of the fact that Ivana's fate is not her fate, nor is she Ivana herself) had an immeasurable influence on this novel.

3.4. *Cabbage Leafing* by Igor Beleš

Cabbage Leafing, a novel by Igor Beleš published in 2023, develops the story of five 11-year-olds in Borovo Naselje in 1991. Borovo Naselje is a suburban settlement of Vukovar, a town in eastern Croatia that suffered the most tremendous casualties during the war in Croatia in the early 1990s. During the three-month battle for Vukovar in the autumn of 1991, the most difficult battle in the Homeland War, Vukovar was utterly destroyed, and during the Serbian occupa-

tion and after the fall of the city, its population was exiled, killed, or taken to camps. Vukovar is the largest Croatian port on the Danube, and Borovo Naselje is known for the Borovo footwear factory, the largest rubber and footwear company in the former Yugoslavia (cf. Šojat 2019).

The narrator and focaliser of the story is the 11-year-old boy Zoran, who recounts the events that began in the spring of 1991 and ended in autumn of the same year. Zoran lives quite an ordinary childhood like most boys of his age – he socialises with a few of his best friends within their group of children (called the An Gang), loves comics and music, falls in love with a girl named Nikolina, who is also a member of the group, experiences his first kiss, and balances between daily life with his mum, older sister, and his strict stepfather and occasional visits to his father. The plot begins to develop very quickly when the members of the An Gang start to investigate the mystery of the disappearance of children from their classes, as well as their entire families – the children disappear overnight; they simply do not show up at school one day, so Zoran and his team are interested in the cause of this. The novel, therefore, starts as an adventure novel, more precisely, as

a crime novel, with the investigation as the central narrative figure and children in the role of the investigator. In parallel, however, the children notice that increasingly serious changes are taking place in the society around them – adults are increasingly nervous and increasingly begin to emphasise their national origin. Thus, the children suddenly discover that they are Serbs or Croats, or possibly some other third thing, although they did not know anything about it until then, and the concept of nationality is not clear or meaningful to them. When one day a boy who is a member of their group goes missing, they are genuinely concerned and realise that something serious is happening. More precisely, the mysterious disappearances are beginning to be associated with the growing militarisation they see all around them. It does not take long for the war to actually start, which adds to the confusion and chaos in their lives. The children's everyday life, otherwise marked by fun and adventure, increasingly becomes a struggle for bare existence. Some children are sent to exile, those of Serbian origin are sent to Serbia by adults, some fathers go to the battlefield, and Zoran, together with his best friend Bojan, takes a motorboat down

the Danube to the Serbian town of Futog in the province of Vojvodina, because that is where Dragan and Goran, two of their Serbian friends from the company, are being sheltered by their parents. The situation, however, is further complicated; the war is brewing, and it is impossible for the boys to return. From there, Beleš's novel definitely ceases to be an adventure novel and grows into a sombre war novel full of elements of thriller and tragedy. In Futog, the boys first stay with Goran's grandmother and then hide in the house of Dragan's grandmother, thanks to the kindness and empathy of the two older women, although many people around them (especially Dragan's father) do not tolerate Croats and are themselves engaged in the fighting for the capture of Vukovar and other Croatian places in Slavonia. Zoran and Bojan live in cramped conditions, are worried about their families in Croatia, and avoid going to public places. Their friend Dragan goes to school, while Goran's parents take him to Germany to protect him from the war. The boys help Dragan's grandmother, Savka, pick cabbage since she was left without the help of the men who went to war. As the war rages more and more, the life of the boys from

Croatia in a small Serbian village becomes more unsafe, and they almost no longer come out of the basement. After the fall of Vukovar and the fierce beatings they received from Dragan's father, Zoran and Bojan flee back to Vukovar in the same boat by which they came. There they find a completely demolished town, almost without civilians, while writing on the houses testify that the occupiers had appropriated them. Of all the family, they find only Zoran's angry and drunk stepfather, who had joined the Serbian army. Only to get rid of them, he helps them escape to their people, across the Vuka River, to the Croatian side, but during the crossing, the boy Bojan is killed by the shots of Croatian soldiers who did not immediately realise that it is "their" children who are coming. At the end of the novel, there is an epilogue with a summary view of the later life of all the members of the An Gang, which, just like their friendship, was never the same again – the war left irreparable consequences on their future, as well as the future of their families.

The novel *Cabbage Leafing* is a gripping novel with a profound humanist and anti-war subtext. On the one hand, the author manages to maintain all the qualities of the child's view – cu-

riosity, naivety, tendency to adventure and interconnection through affinities of values, not social markers such as nationality – while on the other hand, the narrative is very detailed, the reality of war is presented without embellishment, as are the characters and their relationships, both the children's and those of the adults constantly present in the background (Zoran's father, mother, stepfather, Bojan's parents, Nikolina's parents, Goran's parents and grandmother, Dragan's parents and grandmother). Although the main character is called Zoran, not Igor (which is the author's first name), a note about the author on the inside cover of the book confirms that the novel has an autobiographical basis: 'Igor Beleš spent his childhood in Borovo Naselje, in a time which he tried to partially transfer from memory into this book' (Beleš 2023). It becomes clear to the reader even before the reading itself that this is an autobiographical experience that is more or less fictionalised during the construction of the novelistic world.

The titular motif of the cabbage, at the same time the leitmotif of the novel, is a strong symbol and metaphorically represents the fate of a whole generation of children and young adults – those who did not even reach

maturity, and who, just like the cabbage, had their heads cut off, either in the literal or in the conveyed sense of the removal of the right to grow up in normal peacetime circumstances. The narrator reveals the symbolism of cabbage as early as the novel's first sentences.

Spring is the best time for planting cabbage, and autumn for harvesting and pickling. The end credits of my childhood began to roll in the spring and ended in the fall with the leafing of cabbage. The cabbage is harvested so that its head is cut off from the base of the leaves. We had better luck. (Beleš 2023: 7)

Furthermore, the third part of the novel – the most shocking and tragic one – is entitled 'How green cabbage is made into red cabbage'. In addition to the fact that the boys actually pick cabbage in it, helping Dragan's grandmother and at one point (in order to distract themselves from the shots heard from the outside) pretend that the cabbage leaves are the pages of new issues of their favourite comics, the cabbage motif increasingly appears in a negative context – it is related to the aggression of Dragan's father Radovan who is

full of contempt for Croats, including Zoran and Bojan. In situations of anger exacerbated by alcoholism, he shoots cabbage heads, and on the day when Vukovar falls, he beats the boys in a cellar full of cabbage. That is to say, since the boys needed to hide, they were ordered to sleep in the cellar with a mountain of fresh cabbage, along with their improvised beds and a barrel with pickled cabbage. Therefore, the red cabbage from the title alludes to aggression, blood, tribulation, and suffering as key semantic fixtures of the novel's third part. The culmination of suffering, and at the same time the entire complex structure, is the final part of the novel in which two best friends try to return to their native Borovo, but one of them does not succeed. In the scene of Bojan's murder, the reader experiences a profound anti-cathartic effect generated from a strong sense of absurdity as an essential ingredient of (every) war and further strengthened by the fact that members of the An Gang remained uninfected by the madness of war. Moreover, they represent a kind of antipode to a number of frenzied adults. It is important to note that the novel is not subject to the black-and-white depiction of children and adults – children are thus

not idealised or portrayed in the form of the so-called Apollonian child, a being full of natural goodness and clarity of vision (cf. Jenks 2005). On the contrary, children are initially confused by what is happening; they do not cope with the new circumstances and are oriented to their leisure, while, on the other hand, not all adults succumb to the fantasies of wartime circumstances, which manifest themselves in the form of nationalist ideologies. Among the adults, there are some who manage to preserve common sense in wartime circumstances on both sides of the war (Dragan's grandmother and mother, Goran's parents, Zoran's mother, etc.), just as among their children, there are those who, in the context of war, take on the adults' hatred of other ethnicities (children from Dragan's class). The world of children and the world of adults, therefore, are only partially different – by means of a detailed depiction of children's everyday life in peacetime and in times of war, as well as a convincing outline of psychemic narrative figures (cf. Peleš 1999), the novel points to the general differences between children and adults that are based on children's lack of work, love of adventure, and the need to maintain close friendships

(while these characteristics are lacking among adults). However, it also does not idealise children, i.e., it shows that transformative takeovers of ethically problematic attitudes and behaviours coming from adults are indeed possible. The depiction of children in Beleš's novel thus departs from the dichotomous Jenks' model, i.e., it does not result in either the Apollonian or Dionysian image of the child but rather establishes a model which Karen Smith calls 'the Athenian child' which rests on the child's abilities and power of action and is realised through responsibility and reflexivity (Smith 2012: 24).

3.5. *The Croat Factory* by Nebojša Lujanović

In Lujanović's novel *The Croat Factory* (Lujanović 2023), the narrative is also derived from the vision of the child character, the protagonist of the events. He is an unnamed 12-year-old boy who, in the first half of the 1990s, together with his mother, grandfather, and younger sister, took refuge from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in neighbouring Croatia. They found accommodation in their uncle's modest and unsightly apartment in Zagreb, where their uncle often came for unannounced visits, supervision,

and control. The boy's family lives in poor material conditions, and worry and nervousness mainly affect the mother, who feels responsible for the other members, while the father remains in Bosnia, neglecting the family relationships. Therefore, the head of the family is the mother, and the greatest burden of the new situation falls on her shoulders. Not wanting to suffer such scarcity any longer, she decides to take matters into her own hands – starting *The Croat Factory* (the titular motif of the novel), which is, of course, an ironic-parodic naming introduced by the narrator who, through the prism of humour, but also unequivocal social criticism, is directed at the burgeoning fascination with the issues of national identity in the former Yugoslavia during the war and post-war years. Namely, the boy's mother, with the help of secret connections, begins to supply illegal identity documents to the refugees who had been arriving en masse from Bosnia for years, without which they would not be able to secure registration, housing, and other benefits in Croatia. Such documents can be costly, so the boy's family no longer suffers material deprivation.

Although the narrator also touches on those everyday situa-

tions in children's lives that happen more or less to all children in the world, such as friendships, first love, and school problems, the boy's family context is still in the foreground in unusual circumstances. This novel differs from the novels discussed above in that it gives a prominent role to the characters of adults, primarily the boy's mother and grandfather. Also, the novel skilfully combines different tonal and stylistic procedures – serious and humorous tones, elements of tragedy and comedy, dramatic effects and the grotesque, confirming that it primarily counts on a mature, experienced reader who will be able to recognise and understand them, as well as the impulses of social criticism that emerge from such a heterogeneous generic and stylistic assemblage by pointing lucidly to various social anomalies (from the attitude of society towards refugees to nationalist worldviews). When the boy presents his family situation, he does it casually and with humour but without embellishment. For example, the grandfather who does not get out of bed for days is described as follows:

He lies in bed, he winks
only when we feed him,
when mother changes

him, it's probably his way of saying "thanks", and then he turns off what little he has. It's like turning off the TV. She didn't leave us with him anymore. When we leave him alone, I think he jumps on his feet, plays folk songs, and dances around the house. Alone, as if doing a circle dance. And I think he does it every time. And in between, he constantly complains about us not taking him to Bosnia and about the country that doesn't end the war (Lujanović 2023: 148).

Although at first, it seems that the boy is not capable of coping with the new circumstances in which he finds himself, he meticulously absorbs everything that is happening around him, primarily the behaviour of his family members but also numerous other people he encounters (from the unknown people who come to their apartment for documents and temporary accommodation to the neighbours) and actually grows up quickly. He is a bright boy with a developed social intelligence who, like an antenna, catches almost all the signals that the new reality sends – he notices the fear and loneliness of his

younger sister, his mother's nervousness and inner breakdown, his grandfather's gradual abandonment of life, his uncle's egocentricity, the manipulative gestures with which some adults address his mother, pressed by personal distress. The boy is more intelligent and knowledgeable than his surroundings think; he is a voice of reason in a distorted reality. His inner voice is received by the reader with approval, even a kind of admiration.

I think to myself. Fuck you, uncle. You and everyone else. I will write on my forehead that I am twelve years old. What's wrong with them all? I am only required to know when the school assignment is due and how many stickers I still need for my Cro Army or Animal Kingdom albums. And that's it. (Lujanović 2023: 154)

Lujanović's child-narrator is, therefore, much closer to the idea of an active, capable child who acts as best as he knows in the context of demanding circumstances (the Athenian child), rather than the idea of an ideal, absolutely innocent and passive child (the Apollonian child).

However, the peculiarity of Lujanović's text is primarily in the greater proportion of humorous-grotesque and satirical tones in a book dealing with war topics compared to any of the previously mentioned novels. Moreover, the reader gets the impression that it is precisely thanks to a hefty dose of humour and irony that the boy grows up quickly into a conscious and mature young person and preserves emotional stability in a disturbed family and social context. Furthermore, thanks to the comic-grotesque register in some situations (e.g., naming his mother's activities 'the Croat factory'), the social milieu of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia, obsessed as it is with issues of national affiliation and divisions into *ours* and *theirs*, is parodically denounced.

Although himself a child with refugee experience in Croatia during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lujanović does not name his main character, so the issue of the autobiographical contract remains open to the reader. In order to answer the question of whether this is an autobiographical novel or not, we should, therefore, know the actual context of the author's life, but this fact, of course, is not crucial for experiencing and

interpreting this somewhat atypical war novel.

4. Conclusion: modalities of growing up in wartime in the contemporary Croatian novel and their position of mediation in the literary field

It is evident that the problem of wartime childhood and growing up, otherwise a frequent topic in children's literature, is increasingly echoed in literature intended for adult recipients. In contemporary Croatian novel production framework, several such novels have been published in the last two decades, where there has been a noticeable increase in the war problem – more precisely, its reflection on a child's life – in the last few years.⁵ Analysing five contemporary novels published by renowned publishers in Croatia from 2008 to 2023, one can observe two key modalities in the depiction of wartime childhoods. The first refers to the

⁵ In addition to the novels analysed here, the reference to war is also present in Kristian Novak's novel *Dark Mother Earth* (Novak 2013) and Ena Katarina Haler's novel *The Innocent* (Haler 2024). Given, however, that in the former novel the war is still conceived as something yet to come, while the latter deals with the post-war situation, these novels were not included in this analysis.

novels that depict wartime childhood incorporated into the context of violence and pain, while the second modality implies the depiction of war only as a background, i.e., a secondary factor in growing up.

Furthermore, while the second modality is confirmed by only one novel – *Underground Barbie* by Kolanović, the first is much more common. Most authors, therefore, are inclined to such a depiction of war that deeply penetrates all pores of the young protagonist's life without hesitating to shed light on even the most challenging and tragic events, experiences, and traumas. Some of them portray the young protagonist as a direct physical victim of the circumstances of war – such as the novels *In Late Summer* by Magdalena Blažević or *Cabbage Leafing* by Igor Beleš (we could call them the first type within the first modality) – while others portray the young protagonist as an indirect victim of war, focusing not so much on the direct physical consequences as on the psychological and social changes that the war brought to their lives and the lives of their families. We could call these the second type within the first modality, exemplified by the novels *The Hotel Tito* by Ivana Bodrožić and

The Croat Factory by Nebojša Lujanović.

The most important common feature of all the novels analysed here is the first-person singular narration, the voice of the narrator who himself/herself participated in the action or, more precisely, was a participant in the space-time of war. Therefore, the point of view in all the novels analysed belongs to the main character, the girl or the boy, with only occasional minimal deviation from such a focal position. Interestingly, in all the novels analysed, the main protagonists are children between 11 and 14 years old, either pre-pubertal or early pubertal. Although to the adults who share the daily wartime life with the child, and perhaps at first to the readers as well, the child-narrator seems to be an unreliable witness, with the development of the novel, the reader realises that the child sees and understands more than the adults around them think. It is also important to note that it is precisely during their childhood that the authors of all the novels presented have experienced war. It is clear, then, that the autobiographical experience was the main driver for shaping the fictional novelistic discourse, regardless of the extent to which that experience was ultimately

upgraded or modified. All the novels, therefore, can be seen as autobiographical, i.e., pseudo-autobiographical novels – the latter, especially, in cases where the name of the character differs from the name of the author (two novels are such, while in the remaining three novels the character is not explicitly named).

If we look at the genre and narrative-stylistic structure of these discourses, it is noticeable that they often exhibit a hybrid nature and that it is mostly impossible to put them under a unique genre or poetic procedure. *In Late Summer* thus has the characteristics of poetic prose; *The Hotel Tito* uses simple, unpretentious language to represent the daily life of exiles; *Cabbage Leafing* is at first adventure-oriented, then turns into a dark and tragic thriller, almost a horror; *Underground Barbie* lucidly plays with elements of pop culture by using children's play as a simulacrum of reality, while *The Croat Factory* is a satirical-grotesque depiction of the social climate of the 1990s. If we ask ourselves about the key difference between the usual war novels aimed at children and these novels about growing up in times of war, i.e., whether the boundary between a novel for children and a novel for adults

can be precisely defined, it seems that the answer lies precisely in the sphere of poetics, more precisely, in the sphere of narrative-stylistic design. In fact, it is precisely those novels that are more complex in their narrative-stylistic profile – such as, for example, *The Croat Factory* or *In Late Summer* – that can hardly be said entirely within reach of a child reader in terms of experience and cognition and thus interpretation. Socio-critical tones are most intensively generated from such complex genre-stylistic procedures, especially those that penetrate the ironic-satirical-grotesque expression modalities, and they are certainly not fully accessible to the (too) young reader.

On the other hand, novels based on the simplicity of utterance, children's everyday life, play, or adventure, such as *The Hotel Tito* and *Underground Barbie*, and, partially, *Cabbage Leafing*, can undoubtedly find readers among children, i.e., the teenage audience. The latter is undoubtedly confirmed by the inclusion of the novels *The Hotel Tito* and *Underground Barbie* to the extended (recommended) list of required reading under the national Croatian Language Curriculum [Kurikulum nastavnog predmeta Hrvatski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije, 2019].

These novels (and it is possible to assume that the same can be applied to other works with the topic of growing up and the child as a narrator which do not necessarily deal with the war context) function as mediators of sorts between children's literature, literature for young adults, and literature for adults, i.e., as spaces of intergenerational reception interference. In other words, they serve as ex-

amples of the type of literature that erases age limits, which modern literary theory often calls 'crossover literature' (cf. Beckett 2008, Falconer 2008).

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