

Katarina Tepesh. *Escape from Despair: A Croatian Family's Survival.*
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Katarina Tepesh's harrowing and engagingly straightforward account of her family history in communist Croatia and then in the United States after fleeing an abusive and alcoholic father in 1968 should be added to the shelf of memoirs of such family legacy, both for the new information it adds as well as for the story it continues to tell.

This is the familiar story of the legacy of family trauma, alcoholism, and abuse—and as old as Original Sin. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a rise in literary and cultural accounts of growing up under the dark shadows of alcoholism and mental illness. Mary Karr's poetic rendering of her East Texas upbringing, *The Liars' Club*, is credited with the resurgence of memoir writing. In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt captured the frame of mind of a child growing up under an Irish-romantic-alcoholic father that slaked his frustrated dreams and inflicted an amazing amount of suffering on his brood.

Tepesh's spare and reportorial account of her Croatian family living near the border with Slovenia adds much-needed cultural perspective. The memoir introduces her family's history (a marriage initiated by a rape) with this straightforward connection:

My turbulent family history mirrors the history of two countries, Croatia and Slovenia. For centuries, Croatia and Slovenia have been caught in turmoil between powerful empires or invaded by aggressive neighbors. Just as Croatians and Slovenians always wanted to gain their freedom from their conquerors and live in peace, my own family was abused and sought freedom.

And therein lies the paradox: how to obtain peace and freedom? Does "escape" from political and patriarchal tyranny by the channels leading to green cards and citizenship promise escape from its legacy? Tepesh, significantly, reports that this is often not the case. Tepesh's poor long-suffering mother and six children save their lives by emigrating to New York. However, the family remains haunted; the book could have been subtitled "No Escape from Despair." Tepesh points out the irony of having a family protector, her oldest brother, who tried to fight off their father as a boy but grew up to become the tyrant of the house himself. Her mother, from whom one would expect signs of affection and happiness once removed from the daily physical and emotional beatings, remained emotionally cut off. Tepesh and her sisters find themselves in parallel situations with men, although it appears that Tepesh has now escaped by

setting up an independent existence and by working on behalf of worthy causes, like the rape victims of the recent Yugoslav wars.

How we carry our family and cultural legacy around in the land of the free, where the rule of law and protection of rights (ideally) hold sway, is the question that remains to be investigated. This is also where I have the only quibble with Tepesh's thesis: in a couple of places an overly facile political, specifically feminist, connection is made. She makes it clear that what kept her mother in her situation was blind obedience to the dictates of the Catholic Church, whose teachings permeated every aspect of village life in Croatia. It was a church whose priests and nuns ignored the savage beatings her father inflicted on his wife and children.

Once in New York, Tepesh recounts,

The biggest discovery in America for me was the women's rights marches. Even though I didn't fully understand the details, I grasped the overall idea and saw it as the solution to our family's problems, as well as the way women were treated in my old country. (126)

Tepesh rightly calls our attention to the use of rape as a means of terror and torture, both on the battlefield and in the home. However, she provides too simple a connection—and therefore a solution—between the “personal” and the political. The solution, I would suggest, is not entirely political.

Nor can such abuse be traced in a straight line back to “repressive” institutions, whether political or religious. Surely, for as many alcoholic brutes as Tepesh's father, there were many devout Catholics that exhibited bravery, kindness, and responsibility toward their families under the most trying circumstances of war and poverty. Conversely, some men that grow up in affluence and freedom, in a secular Eden with “liberated” mothers, can grow up to be abusive toward women. I have personally known both types of men. (Moreover, abuse, although more commonly perpetrated by men, is of course not limited to men.)

However, these are minor points in a narrative that flows along at a rapid pace. I would have finished the book in one sitting after its arrival in my mailbox if other duties had not called me away. As it was, I allotted a period of time for reading the next day and finished it, with many insights and provocations to thinking about my own history as a Slovenian immigrant, albeit at the tender age of two. I was particularly drawn to Tepesh's descriptions of village life.

This memoir deserves wide exposure. Given the attention to multiculturalism in schools, it could be added to reading lists as a contribution from an immigrant community hitherto overlooked. (Nonetheless, based on my own experience in academia, I can see the

political correctness censors clucking in approval of the author's embrace of feminist causes yet consternated by her realistic picture of life under "Dictator Tito," with descriptions of luxurious accommodations for the communists while villagers lived in squalor. Accounts of communism by those that actually lived under its rule, like Solzhenitzyn, are often presented as manifestations of delusional neuroses: that is, a belief in freedom or God. However, this is another essay.)

In the name of true multiculturalism and free speech, Tepesh's memoir should be read because it offers insight into two realms: the culture of Croatia and the pattern of family abuse. In terms of the latter, it can give hope and healing to those that have found themselves in similar circumstances. Indeed, Tepesh's father, like most abusers, was able to find himself another woman willing to be his victim. Solace can be gained from seeing the pattern: that it *is* a pattern—that it is not something inherent in the victim that invites such abuse. So, in this way, reading this book can help break the chain of the victim blaming herself and thereby justifying the abuse. It can also help break the cycle of religious and government authorities looking the other way while the weakest are abused.

I know that Tepesh's memoir will enjoy its permanent place on my bookshelf tucked between Mary Karr's and Frank McCourt's. To learn more, visit www.katarinatepesh.com and www.tepeshbooks.com.

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Works Cited

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Mccourt, Frank. 1996. *Angela's Ashes*. New York: Scribner.