



Girl at War: A Novel

By Sara Novic

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**NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY
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 AWARD WINNER • LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE FINALIST
 • LONGLISTED FOR THE BAILEYS WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION**

For readers of *The Tiger's Wife* and *All the Light We Cannot See* comes a powerful debut novel about a girl's coming of age—and how her sense of family, friendship, love, and belonging is profoundly shaped by war.

Zagreb, 1991. Ana Juri? is a carefree ten-year-old, living with her family in a small apartment in Croatia's capital. But that year, civil war breaks out across Yugoslavia, splintering Ana's idyllic childhood. Daily life is altered by food rations and air raid drills, and soccer matches are replaced by sniper fire. Neighbors grow suspicious of one another, and Ana's sense of safety starts to fray. When the war arrives at her doorstep, Ana must find her way in a dangerous world.

New York, 2001. Ana is now a college student in Manhattan. Though she's tried to move on from her past, she can't escape her memories of war—secrets she keeps even from those closest to her. Haunted by the events that forever changed her family, Ana returns to Croatia after a decade away, hoping to make peace with the place she once called home. As she faces her ghosts, she must come to terms with her country's difficult history and the events that interrupted her childhood years before.

Moving back and forth through time, *Girl at War* is an honest, generous, brilliantly written novel that illuminates how history shapes the individual. Sara Novi? fearlessly shows the impact of war on one young girl—and its legacy on all of us. It's a debut by a writer who has stared into recent history to find a story that continues to resonate today.

Praise for *Girl at War*

“Outstanding . . . *Girl at War* performs the miracle of making the stories of broken lives in a distant country feel as large and universal as myth.”—*The New York Times Book Review* (Editor's Choice)

“[An] old-fashioned page-turner that will demand all of the reader's attention,

happily given. A debut novel that astonishes.”—*Vanity Fair*

“Shattering . . . The book begins with what deserves to become one of contemporary literature’s more memorable opening lines. The sentences that follow are equally as lyrical as a folk lament and as taut as metal wire wrapped through an electrified fence.”—*USA Today*

“Gripping . . . Novi?, in tender and eloquent prose, explores the challenge of how to live even after one has survived.”—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

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“An important and profoundly moving reading experience.”—*The National*

“Remarkable.”—*Julia Glass, The Boston Globe*

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“An unforgettable portrait of how war forever changes the life of the individual . . . a writer working with deep reserves of talent, heart, and mind.”—*Gary Shteyngart, author of Super Sad True Love Story*

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Editorial Review

Review

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“Sara Novi?’s powerful debut novel . . . is an important and profoundly moving reading experience. . . . It will be interesting to see if another novelist, particularly a first-time novelist, can match Novi?’s bravura, gut-punching opening section. . . . *Girl at War* is a superb exploration of conflict and its aftermath.”—*The National*

“Astonishing . . . *Girl at War* is an extraordinarily poised and potent debut novel, a story about grief and exile, memory and identity, and the redemptive power of love.”—*Financial Times*

“Remarkable.”—**Julia Glass**, *The Boston Globe*

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“One of this year’s most discussed debuts . . . What makes [*Girl at War*] unique is that it’s not concerned with unmasking the horrors of war, as many have repeatedly done. Instead, this book is an exploration of how humans grow, prosper and move on from unthinkable times.”—*Paste*

“Novi?’s important debut brings painfully home the jarring fact that what happens in today’s headlines on a daily basis—the atrocities of wars in Africa and the Mideast—is neither new nor even particularly the worst that humankind can commit. Take it from ten-year-old Ana Juri?, conscripted into the Yugoslav civil war in the early 1990s by the bad luck of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. . . . As Novi? gradually reveals, you can take the girl out of the war zone, but you can’t take the war zone out of the girl. By the time Ana becomes a student at a New York university, all that violence has been bottled up inside her head for a decade. Thanks to Novi?’s considerable skill, Ana’s return visit to her homeland and her past is nearly as cathartic for the reader as it is for Ana.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Understated, self-assured . . . The tutelary spirits of W. G. Sebald and Rebecca West hover over the proceedings. . . . Elegiac, and understandably if unrelievedly so, with a matter-of-factness about death and uprootedness. A promising start.”—**Kirkus Reviews**

“[A] smart and insightful debut, which will please fans of *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* or the essays of Aleksander Hemon . . . [Novi?] ably conveys Ana’s plight, torn between two cultures and unable to feel at home in either one.”—**BookPage**

“We know the broad outlines of the terrible shattering of the Balkans in the early 1990s, but the essence of war is in the details, and Croatian-born Novi?’s debut novel delivers a finely honed sense of what the bloodshed really meant for those who withstood it. . . . Novi?’s heartbreaking book is all the more effective for its use of personal rather than sensational detail and will be embraced by a wide range of readers.”—**Library Journal**

“Set against the backdrop of the Bosnian Croat war, this vivid debut recalls *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Main character Ana’s journey from a ten-year-old tomboy to young woman will leave you reeling.”—**Stylist (U.K.)**

“An unforgettable portrait of how war forever changes the life of the individual, *Girl at War* is a remarkable debut by a writer working with deep reserves of talent, heart, and mind.”—**Gary Shteyngart, author of *Little Failure and Super Sad True Love Story***

“Intimate, crushingly brutal, and beautiful at once, *Girl at War* is the work of someone far more mature than her years. It constitutes signal proof that even great history is insufficient to tell the story of the twentieth century in Europe: Great fiction like this book is required, too.”—**Robert D. Kaplan, author of *Balkan Ghosts and Asia’s Cauldron***

“A breathtaking debut. With piercing clarity and devastating wit, Novi? traces the enduring fallout of a childhood interrupted by conflict. *Girl at War* is an unforgettable, deeply affecting meditation on identity and memory, loss and survival, and what it means to feel at home in the world.”—**Jennifer duBois, author of *Cartwheel and A Partial History of Lost Causes***

“*Girl at War* depicts the still-fresh nightmare of the Yugoslavian civil war, survived by a girl much too young to know all she knows. Sara Novi? writes with ruthless understatement not only about a modern city subjected to primitive horrors, but about young Ana’s subsequent war against the American urge to forget. Sentence after perfectly weighted sentence lands with the sound of a gavel. The first fifty pages might be the best fifty pages you read this year.”—**Jonathan Dee, author of the Pulitzer Prize finalist *The Privileges and A Thousand Pardons***

“Sara Novi? isn’t here to play games. Her debut novel, *Girl at War*, serves as the announcement of an audacious talent. Great war stories are engaging and rough and honest, and Novi?’s book is certainly all three. But it’s the fact that all this war is happening to a child that makes this book singular and special. You’ll hold tight to this book as if you were going to protect the young girl at its center—but come to find out, she’s the one with all the courage and all the strength.”—**Victor LaValle, author of *The Devil in Silver***

“*Girl at War* is a harrowing, unforgettable novel. From the devastation of the Yugoslavian civil war, Sara Novi? has wrought a deeply moving and necessary story of exile, family, and memory; a prayer over the unquiet graves of public and private trauma. Novi?’s prose is so assured and wise that you’ll think this must be her tenth book rather than her first one, but indeed this is a debut—a major, unmissable debut.”—**Justin**

Taylor, author of *Flings*

“Sara Novi? is a brilliant storyteller with a large, generous heart—a bright new star in the literary firmament. And *Girl at War* is a haunting, chilling, and inspiring tale of a young woman’s coming of age in the shadow of war. It is as gorgeously crafted and compelling as it is moving, and there is a tenderness here, a sense of how exile—both physical and emotional—can shape our destinies, and of how friendship and love can allow us to survive and thrive.”—**Jay Neugeboren, author of *Imagining Robert* and *The Stolen Jew***

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Sara Novi? was born in 1987 and has lived in the United States and Croatia. She is a graduate of the MFA program at Columbia University, where she studied fiction and translation. She is the fiction editor at *Blunderbuss Magazine* and teaches writing at the Fashion Institute of Technology and Columbia University. She lives in Queens, New York.

From the Hardcover edition.

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I

They Both Fell

1

The war in Zagreb began over a pack of cigarettes. There had been tensions beforehand, rumors of disturbances in other towns whispered above my head, but no explosions, nothing outright. Caught between the mountains, Zagreb sweltered in the summer, and most people abandoned the city for the coast during the hottest months. For as long as I could remember my family had vacationed with my godparents in a fishing village down south. But the Serbs had blocked the roads to the sea, at least that’s what everyone was saying, so for the first time in my life we spent the summer inland.

Everything in the city was clammy, doorknobs and train handrails slick with other people’s sweat, the air heavy with the smell of yesterday’s lunch. We took cold showers and walked around the flat in our underwear. Under the run of cool water I imagined my skin sizzling, steam rising from it. At night we lay atop our sheets, awaiting fitful sleep and fever dreams.

I turned ten in the last week of August, a celebration marked by a soggy cake and eclipsed by heat and disquiet. My parents invited their best friends—my godparents, Petar and Marina—over for dinner that weekend. The house where we usually stayed the summers belonged to Petar’s grandfather. My mother’s break from teaching allowed us three months of vacation—my father taking a train, meeting us later—and the five of us would live there together on the cliffs along the Adriatic. Now that we were landlocked, the weekend dinners had become an anxious charade of normalcy.

Before Petar and Marina arrived I argued with my mother about putting on clothes.

“You’re not an animal, Ana. You’ll wear shorts to dinner or you’ll get nothing.”

“In Tiska I only wear my swimsuit bottoms anyway,” I said, but my mother gave me a look and I got dressed.

That night the adults were engaging in their regular debate about exactly how long they’d known each other. They had been friends since before they were my age, they liked to say, no matter how old I was, and after the better part of an hour and a bottle of FeraVino they’d usually leave it at that. Petar and Marina had no children for me to play with, so I sat at the table holding my baby sister and listening to them vie for the farthest-reaching memory. Rahela was only eight months old and had never seen the coast, so I talked to her about the sea and our little boat, and she smiled when I made fish faces at her.

After we ate, Petar called me over and handed me a fistful of dinar. “Let’s see if you can beat your record,” he said. It was a game between us—I would run to the store to buy his cigarettes and he would time me. If I beat my record he’d let me keep a few dinar from the change. I stuffed the money in the pocket of my cutoffs and took off down the nine flights of stairs.

I was sure I was about to set a new record. I’d perfected my route, knew when to hug the curves around buildings and avoid the bumps in the side streets. I passed the house with the big orange beware of dog sign (though no dog ever lived there that I could remember), jumped over a set of cement steps, and veered away from the dumpsters. Under a concrete archway that always smelled like piss, I held my breath and sped into the open city. I skirted the biggest pothole in front of the bar frequented by the daytime drinkers, slowing only slightly as I came upon the old man at his folding table hawking stolen chocolates. The newsstand kiosk’s red awning shifted in a rare breeze, signaling me like a finish line flag.

I put my elbows on the counter to get the clerk’s attention. Mr. Petrovi? knew me and knew what I wanted, but today his smile looked more like a smirk.

“Do you want Serbian cigarettes or Croatian ones?” The way he stressed the two nationalities sounded unnatural. I had heard people on the news talking about Serbs and Croats this way because of the fighting in the villages, but no one had ever said anything to me directly. And I didn’t want to buy the wrong kind of cigarettes.

“Can I have the ones I always get, please?”

“Serbian or Croatian?”

“You know. The gold wrapper?” I tried to see around his bulk, pointing to the shelf behind him. But he just laughed and waved to another customer, who sneered at me.

“Hey!” I tried to get the clerk’s attention back. He ignored me and made change for the next man in line. I’d already lost the game, but I ran home as fast as I could anyway.

“Mr. Petrovi? wanted me to pick Serbian or Croatian cigarettes,” I told Petar. “I didn’t know the answer and he wouldn’t give me any. I’m sorry.”

My parents exchanged looks and Petar motioned for me to sit on his lap. He was tall—taller than my father—and flushed from the heat and wine. I climbed up on his wide thigh.

“It’s okay,” he said, patting his stomach. “I’m too full for cigarettes anyway.” I pulled the money from my shorts and relinquished it. He pressed a few dinar coins into my palm.

“But I didn’t win.”

“Yes,” he said. “But today that’s not your fault.”

That night my father came into the living room, where I slept, and sat down on the bench of the old upright piano. We’d inherited the piano from an aunt of Petar’s—he and Marina didn’t have space for it—but we couldn’t afford to have it tuned, and the first octave was so flat all the keys gave out the same tired tone. I heard my father pressing the foot pedals down in rhythm with the habitual nervous jiggle of his leg, but he didn’t touch the keys. After a while he got up and came to sit on the armrest of the couch, where I lay. Soon we were going to buy a mattress.

“Ana? You awake?”

I tried to open my eyes, felt them flitting beneath the lids.

“Awake,” I managed.

“Filter 160s. They’re Croatian. So you know for next time.”

“Filter 160s,” I said, committing it to memory.

My father kissed my forehead and said good night, but I felt him in the doorway moments later, his body blocking out the kitchen lamplight.

“If I’d been there,” he whispered, but I wasn’t sure he was talking to me so I stayed quiet and he didn’t say anything else.

In the morning Milošević was on TV giving a speech, and when I saw him, I laughed. He had big ears and a fat red face, jowls sagging like a dejected bulldog. His accent was nasal, nothing like the gentle, throaty voice of my father. Looking angry, he hammered his fist in rhythm with his speech. He was saying something about cleansing the land, repeating it over and over. I had no idea what he was talking about, but as he spoke and pounded he got redder and redder. So I laughed, and my mother poked her head around the corner to see what was so funny.

“Turn that off.” I felt my cheeks go hot, thinking she was mad at me for laughing at what must have been an important speech. But her face softened quickly. “Go play,” she said. “Bet Luka’s already beat you to the Trg.”

My best friend, Luka, and I spent the summer biking around the town square and meeting our classmates for pickup football games. We were freckled and tan and perpetually grass-stained, and now that we were down to just a few weeks of freedom before the start of school we met even earlier and stayed out later, determined not to let any vacation go to waste. I found him along our regular bike route. We cycled side by side, Luka occasionally swinging his front tire into mine so that we’d nearly crash. It was a favorite joke of his and he laughed the whole way, but I was still thinking about Petrović. In school we’d been taught to ignore distinguishing ethnic factors, though it was easy enough to discern someone’s ancestry by their last name. Instead we were trained to regurgitate pan-Slavic slogans: “Bratstvo i Jedinstvo!” Brotherhood and Unity. But now it seemed the differences between us might be important after all. Luka’s family was originally from Bosnia, a mixed state, a confusing third category. Serbs wrote in Cyrillic and Croats in the Latin alphabet, but in Bosnia they used both, the spoken differences even more minute. I wondered if there was a

special brand of Bosnian cigarettes, too, and whether Luka's father smoked those.

When we arrived in the Trg it was crowded and I could tell something was wrong. In light of this new Serb-Croat divide, everything—including the statue of Ban Jelačić, sword drawn—now seemed a clue to the tensions I hadn't seen coming. During World War II the ban's sword was aimed toward the Hungarians in a defensive gesture, but afterward the Communists had removed the statue in a neutralization of nationalistic symbols. Luka and I had watched when, after the last elections, men with ropes and heavy machinery returned Jelačić to his post. Now he was facing south, toward Belgrade.

The Trg had always been a popular meeting place, but today people were swarming around the base of the statue looking frantic, milling through a snarl of trucks and tractors parked right in the cobblestoned Trg, where, on normal days, cars weren't even allowed to drive. Baggage, shipping crates, and an assortment of free-floating housewares brimmed over the backs of flatbeds and were splayed across the square.

I thought of the gypsy camp my parents and I once passed while driving to visit my grandparents' graves in Rakovec, caravans of wagons and trailers housing mysterious instruments and stolen children.

"They'll pour acid in your eyes," my mother warned when I wiggled in the pew while my father lit candles and prayed for his parents. "Little blind beggars earn three times as much as ones who can see." I held her hand and was quiet for the rest of the day.

Luka and I dismounted our bikes and moved cautiously toward the mass of people and their belongings. But there were no bonfires or circus sideshows; there was no music—these were not the migrant people I'd seen on the outskirts of the northern villages.

The settlement was made almost entirely out of string. Ropes, twine, shoelaces, and strips of fabric of various thicknesses were strung from cars to tractors to piles of luggage in an elaborate tangle. The strings supported the sheets and blankets and bigger articles of clothing that served as makeshift tents. Luka and I stared alternately at each other and at the strangers, not knowing the words for what we were seeing, but understanding that it wasn't good.

Candles circled the perimeter of the encampment, melting next to boxes on which someone had written "Contributions for the Refugees." Most people who passed added something to a box, some emptying their pockets.

"Who are they?" I whispered.

"I don't know," Luka said. "Should we give them something?"

I took Petar's dinar from my pocket and gave them to Luka, afraid to get too close myself. Luka had a few coins, too, and I held his bike while he put them in the box. As he leaned in I panicked, worrying that the city of string would swallow him up like the vines that come alive in horror movies. When he turned around I shoved his handlebars at him and he stumbled backward. As we rode away I felt my stomach twist into a knot I would only years later learn to call survivor's guilt.

My classmates and I often met for football matches on the east side of the park, where the grass had fewer lumps. I was the only girl who played football, but sometimes other girls would come down to the field to jump rope and gossip.

“Why do you dress like a boy?” a pigtailed girl asked me once.

“It’s easier to play football in pants,” I told her. The real reason was that they were my neighbor’s clothes and we couldn’t afford anything else.

We began collecting stories. They started out with strings of complex relationships—my best friend’s second cousin, my uncle’s boss—and whoever kicked the ball between improvised (and ever-negotiable) goal markers got to tell their story first. An unspoken contest of gore developed, honoring whoever could more creatively describe the blown-out brains of their distant acquaintances. Stjepan’s cousins had seen a mine explode a kid’s leg, little bits of skin clinging to grooves in the sidewalk for a week afterward. Tomislav had heard of a boy who was shot in the eye by a sniper in Zagora; his eyeball had turned to liquid like a runny egg right there in front of everyone.

At home my mother paced the kitchen talking on the phone to friends in other towns, then hung out the window, passing the news to the next apartment building over. I stood close while she discussed the mounting tensions on the banks of the Danube with the women on the other side of the clothesline, absorbing as much as I could before running off to find my friends. A citywide spy network, we passed on any information we overheard, relaying stories of victims whose links to us were becoming less and less remote.

On the first day of school, our teacher took attendance and found one of our classmates missing.

“Anyone hear from Zlatko?” she said.

“Maybe he went back to Serbia, where he belongs,” said Mate, a boy I’d always found obnoxious. A few people snickered and our teacher shushed them. Beside me, Stjepan raised his hand.

“He moved,” Stjepan said.

“Moved?” Our teacher flipped through some papers on her clipboard. “Are you sure?”

“He lived in my building. Two nights ago I saw his family carrying big suitcases out to a truck. He said they had to leave before the air raids started. He said to tell everyone goodbye.” The class erupted into high-strung chatter at this news:

“What’s an air raid?”

“Who will be our goalie now?”

“Good riddance to him!”

“Shut up, Mate,” I said.

“Enough!” said our teacher. We quieted.

An air raid, she explained, was when planes flew over cities and tried to knock buildings down with bombs. She drew chalky maps denoting shelters, listed the necessities our families should bring underground with us: AM radio, water jug, flashlight, batteries for the flashlight. I didn’t understand whose planes wanted what buildings to explode, or how to tell a regular plane from a bad one, though I was happy for the reprieve from regular lessons. But soon she began to swipe at the board, inciting an angry cloud of eraser dust. She let out a

sigh as if she were impatient with air raids, brushing the settling chalk away from the pleats in her skirt. We moved on to long division, and were not offered a time for asking questions.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Wilhelmina Kane:

In this 21st century, people become competitive in every way. By being competitive now, people have to do something to make these people survive, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice by means of surrounding. One thing that sometimes many people have underestimated it for a while is reading. That's why, by reading a reserve your ability to survive enhance then having chance to endure than other is high. For you personally who want to start reading some sort of book, we give you that Girl at War: A Novel book as beginning and daily reading book. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

Cesar Ford:

Why? Because this Girl at War: A Novel is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap the idea but latter it will jolt you with the secret it inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who all write the book in such wonderful way makes the content within easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning fully. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this ever again or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of positive aspects than the other book have got such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking approach. So , still want to delay having that book? If I had been you I will go to the book store hurriedly.

Rosemary Perez:

In this era which is the greater man or woman or who has ability in doing something more are more special than other. Do you want to become among it? It is just simple solution to have that. What you must do is just spending your time very little but quite enough to have a look at some books. One of many books in the top checklist in your reading list is actually Girl at War: A Novel. This book that is qualified as The Hungry Mountains can get you closer in becoming precious person. By looking right up and review this book you can get many advantages.

Raymond Crandall:

What is your hobby? Have you heard that will question when you got pupils? We believe that that issue was given by teacher with their students. Many kinds of hobby, Every person has different hobby. And you know that little person such as reading or as reading through become their hobby. You must know that reading is very important as well as book as to be the issue. Book is important thing to increase you knowledge, except your own teacher or lecturer. You discover good news or update about something by book. Numerous books that can you choose to use be your object. One of them is actually Girl at War: A Novel.

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