

A Spare Life

Lidija Dimkovska

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With its masterful writing and epic scope, it is certain to find its own footing as an enduring work of world literature.

Late in the novel *A Spare Life*, by Lidija Dimkovska, a character asserts that “every pain is both local and global,” an encapsulation for the grand scope of this powerful and intimate family saga set among the political strife of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

Zlata and Srebra are sisters born conjoined at the head. Their names, “gold” and “silver,” are looked upon as a cruel joke for their fate, which draws ridicule in their 1980s Skopje suburb. The girls come of age amidst their own physical struggles, and their attachment, along with their attendant frustrations and hopes at separation, often parallel the political turmoil of the time.

When the sisters face a serious personal disagreement, the separation becomes a necessity, and they travel to London to undergo the operation, “so [they] could separate from each other—as if [they] were two former republics of Yugoslavia ... by mutual agreement.”

The book’s power is not only in its metaphor, which is effected with a deft hand, but in its scope, which shows the power, subtlety, and difficulties of sustained intimacy for women over generations. The very physical connection the women have is a recurrent theme, as is the separation of head and heart: “That is how it is with people; their hearts are in their heads, and their heads in their hearts,” Zlata observes.

Dimkovska’s writing is a revelation in economy. There is not a wasted word, not an erroneous character. The plot could border on the melodramatic but instead unfolds in a breathless saga of tragedy and depth that is rendered in beautiful, resilient, and spare prose.

Dimkovska earned the European Union Prize for Literature, and her last work to be translated into English was nominated for a Best Translated Book Award in 2013. *A Spare Life* is a rare work of insight—both political and personal—and with its masterful writing and epic scope, it is certain to find its own footing as an enduring work of world literature.

NATASHA GILMORE (Winter 2017)

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