



Ballad for Emma

Blanka Raguz

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This unique novel builds a romance into Croatia's history.

A sweeping tale of love and setback, Blanka Raguz's historical romance *Ballad for Emma* encapsulates major events in the early twentieth century.

The story begins in Croatia and travels across Eastern Europe. After a tumultuous love affair and tragedy, Bertha gives birth to Emma and dies from complications. Later, Emma finds a job working at the mansion of a baroness, where she finds love, heartbreak, and purpose.

In the background, two world wars ignite, throwing Europe into chaos and reverberating down to Emma, who is forced to react to survive. Her story and legacy are preserved by her son in the form of the ballad he composes for her.

The novel is part romance, part historical document. The author, a Croatian native, interweaves Emma's story line with broader historical strokes. These historical segments are decisive and direct, explaining facts and details, but still allowing for emotional connections. They give great insight into how the world wars impacted Croatia and its people, highlighting the general crossfire they found themselves in. The wars are documented from both sides to avoid bias, leading to numerous accounts of tragedies and inspirational tales.

Emma's sections are more passionate and dramatic. Her story often involves reactions to historical goings-on and to personal turmoil, including elements such as misunderstandings, grudges, hope, and delicate relationship balances. These sections are held back from melodrama by reinforcement from the historical accounts, which provide context to character actions and motives. The two writing styles balance to keep things engaging and informative.

The men that Emma falls in love with across her life are a varied and colorful cast, and they often reflect their time periods well. For example, during World War II, Emma is with Comrade Marko, a revolutionary of the Communist Party; the two have many discussions and arguments concerning the party's ideologies and practices.

While some of these romances are formulaic, they form a cohesive whole that reflects not only the changing state of the world but Emma's own growth. The more she experiences, and the more men she meets and falls in love with, the more she matures and learns what is truly important about love.

There is some disconnect between historical sections and Emma's sections, with long stretches devoted to each: for example, several chapters explain the start of World War I, then the book cuts back to Emma's story. This results in a lack of focus. However, by the end, Emma's personal changes serve to mirror Croatia's budding stability and peace.

Ballad for Emma is a unique and interesting novel that builds a romance into Croatian history.

CJ TRIPLETT (July 7, 2017)

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