

Love Songs and Monster Songs

G.M. Holder

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G.M. Holder's ridiculously accomplished debut novel begins with a series of maps. Maps of Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, and the larger territory of former Yugoslavia offer a sample of the settings in this sprawling book and prepare readers for the author's journey. It is a landscape "covered in drugs, graveyards and landmines." But more than the physical world is mapped in this book. While exploring his future wife's homeland, Holder spoke with survivors of a war so devastating that years later parts of Sarajevo still appear under siege. Using these stories as a starting point, he becomes a cartographer of the psychic landscape as well, as he begins to map the dark regions of postwar Yugoslavia's shell-shocked soul.

Like his creator, Holder's narrator also collects stories: stories of prewar life, stories of the long siege of Sarajevo, stories of postwar Yugoslavia, true stories, ghost stories, stories that have happened before, stories so strange they have to be believed. The stories of the war are dark, the details gruesome, and if there is a fault to find with *Love Songs* it is with the somewhat narrow scope: the narrator visits bar after bar, talking to a cast of addicts, alcoholics, unhinged survivors, and squatters who in their destitution often seem interchangeable. The rest of society is largely unexplored. One becomes numbed by the downward march of atrocities and would like to occasionally leave the backwaters and dark recesses and explore a wider range of postwar society.

Holder's novel often blurs the line between fact and fiction. The author himself made the same journey as his narrator, visiting Yugoslavia for the first time in 2002, and meeting many survivors. Yet the stories recorded are not always plausible, and often include ghosts, speaking corpses, and reoccurring phantoms. Taking on the aspects of folklore, the best of these tales become modern legends, and in their surreal bleakness approach the truth of myths.

In one of his many self-commentaries, Holder writes, "The strangeness of these stories was not meant to astonish as much as they were used to locate gravity where we had become unglued to our own dissimilar histories. They were not meant to strike fear either. They only elucidated further for us that, unlike heaven or hell, history records so few miracles."

This passage describes Holder at his best: playfully inter-textual, hopeful if melancholy. Dense with stories and rich in language, *LS&MS* is a manic heir to the tradition of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a bright flare illuminating the darkness of postwar Yugoslavia.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (Summer 2012)

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