FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Salvation and Other Disasters
Josip Novakovich
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Dark and wry ironies pile up like bodies on a battlefield in Jospi Novakovich's fourth book, a collection of excellent short stories about Croations caught in the absurd twistings of their war-ravaged homeland or trying with equal astonishment to find a sensible existence in the United States. Like the wildflowers near Vukovar that both afflict the allergic and then cure them as herbal teas, these tales delineate the unthinkable and make the unexpected seem predictable.

In Sheepskin, a soldier on his way home from the war spots the man he thinks wounded him, kills the man, realizes it may be the wrong person, then courts the dead man's wife, his desire for her fueled by guilt.

In Crimson, another soldier named Milan is forced to kill an aged prisoner, but he gets revenge by killing the captain as the officer is raping a woman. Milan then takes her to safety, marries her, and as the baby grows (is it his child or the captain's?) he admits he raped her, too, before he saved her, and they realize the old prisoner he killed was her father. Olga drives a knife into his stomach, then saves him with three pints of her own blood.

The pace and the dark revelations of this abrupt prose are astonishing, the characters by turns gentle and brutal, vicious and sympathetic. Among the population of these stories are an amateur nun, a blind ophthalmologist, a baby who is "contemplating the paradoxes of infinity as well as the limitations of paradoxes," and a baker who never bakes anything.

The surreal landscape of bombed out buildings and piles of rotting bodies is reminiscent of Kosinski's World War II Poland in The Painted Bird, but Novakovich's characters manage a sly humor amid the sudden reversals of their lives that softens the shock as it heightens the irony. The weird contradictions follow those who make it to America searching for stability in the land of "disease parading as health." With his tongue fizzing in his cheek, Novakovich tells us, "You need not to go to America to feel like an American, just drink Coke with ice, the Eucharist with the blood and the flesh, the wine and the wafer, of the United States of America,

the land that touches the moon.” The sneering irony and the wry humor make these stories both disturbing and delightful.

Norm Wheeler