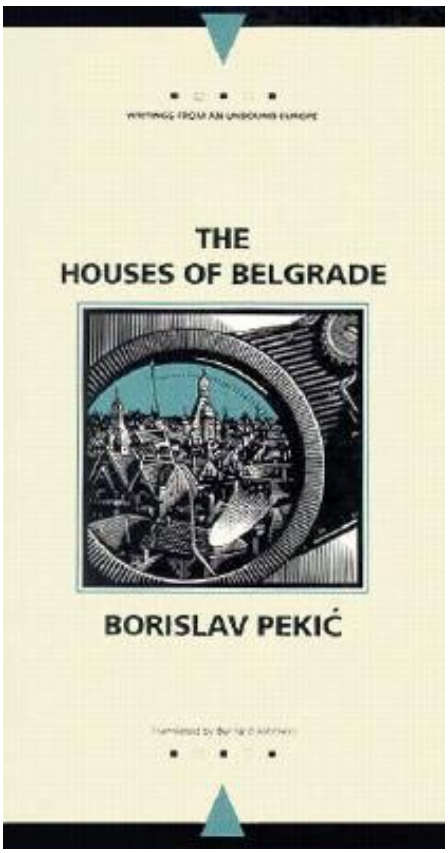

The Houses of Belgrade

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Arsenije Njegovan’s portrait through his obsessive love towards houses which are in his possession. He is able to fall in love with buildings as if they were humans. Symbolically the houses here are a metaphor for mens' yearning for property and beauty. From 1941 to 1968 Arsenije is isolated from the world in his home. The first time he ventures out is in 1968 just at the time of the student’s anti-government demonstrations. There he lands into a fight with the radicals, gets beaten up, and returns home where he writes his testament and dies. With cutting irony Peki? provides a brilliant insight into a mind possessed by a single passion: the love for buildings – the houses of Belgrade. Peki? says: “To enliven history is a work of magic, not of science. The task of literature is not merely to portray an epoch, but to imaginatively resurrect, revive its spirit in a way in which the contemporaries, the protagonists of our historic novel, have experienced it (not we in their place)”.

The Houses of Belgrade Details

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From Reader Review The Houses of Belgrade for online ebook

Victoria says

Houses is a wonderful book and Borislav Peki? is a wonderful writer. While telling, or perhaps one should say, revealing, a simple but affecting plot, Peki? gives the reader much to ponder, about ownership and those who oppose it, and the heartbreaking way history keeps repeating itself. And all is couched in a witty and engaging way. What an achievement!

A warning: the attractive NY Books edition I read has an introduction by the painter Barry Schwabsky, which absolutely must be avoided until the book itself is read, and possibly even then. In the course of telling the story in such detail that all turns and surprises the author carefully fashioned are ruined, Mr. Schwabsky makes many assertions that were alien to my experience of the book, and I was grateful not to have heard them before having lived through it on my own. My rule is: be careful reading about a book in advance, even what's written on the covers, and never, ever, read an introduction to fiction.

Among the many enticing perceptions Peki? gives his readers, I especially liked a character's architectural analysis of Le Corbusier's church at Ronchamp, and the protagonist's love of the buildings he possesses and which support him not merely as a commodity to buy and sell for a profit or as the source of his income but for their individual beauty, and the uselessness of a will or any legal documents in a world without laws and a way to enforce them.

Centuries of war and cruel domination by a succession of ideological or just opportunistic conquerors gives a cynical yet melancholy tinge to everything. "The former Yugoslavia," where Borislav Peki? was born, was the former something else before Yugoslavia and yet something else before that. The backdrop of this heartbreaking history is in the end what the novel is about.

Jim says

Arsénie Negovan, property-owner, is seventy-seven years old. It is the 3rd of June 1968 and he has not stepped outside his front door since the 27th of March 1941. For the past twenty-seven years he has run his business empire with the aid of his wife, Katarina, and the family lawyer, Mr Golovan, while he sits at his window peering at his women through a selection of binoculars: Simonida, Theodora, Emilia, Christina, Juliana, Sophia, Eugénie, Natalia, Barbara, Anastasia, Angelina . . . and those he could not see though his lenses he could picture in his mind’s eye. To each one he had been devoted and had been for many, many years. His wife knows all about them. How could she not? He has photos of them on the wall of his study. And scale models even! Freud said it was sex; Jung, belonging; Viktor Frankl, meaning and Adler, power. In one of his essays, however, Peki? singled out “the will to possess” as one of the most powerful driving forces in our world, a phenomenon which inevitably influences even the “spiritual and moral side of man.”

The ‘women’ are, of course, houses, the things Arsénie Negovan prizes over everything else. Says Arsénie: “Houses are like people: you can’t foresee what they’ll offer until you’ve tried them out, got into their souls and under their skins.”

The book really focuses on the two dates above, the last two times he steps outside and yet by comparing these two times the author presents a curious and unique perspective on the history of Belgrade. You can read my full review on my blog here.

Kevin says

the craft was there, I guess.

Ratko says

??? ??????, ????????? ??????. ??? ?????? ??????.

Moira Downey says

Bit of a miss for me, though I generally enjoy unreliable and often nasty narrators. This one just wasn't engaging.

Also that may be the record for longest period of time it's taken me to get through 200 pages. Eat it, grad school.

Glenn Russell says

Statue of Borislav Peki? in Flower Square, Belgrade, Serbia

Imagine an American movie buff going into a deep sleep Rip Van Winkle-style in 1941 and finally waking up in 1968. The first thing on the agenda, of course, is a trip to the local movie house expecting a variation on the 1941 musical comedy *You'll Never Get Rich* featuring Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth. So happens there's a double feather: *Bullett* starring Steve McQueen and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Whoa! We can imagine the level of instant future shock.

Something along similar lines transpires in *Houses*, Serbian author Borislav Peki?'s 1970 novel about a kingpin Belgrade building owner, who, after having been knocked down, beaten up and traumatized during a riot in the city back in 1941, has sealed himself off in a high-rise apartment for twenty-seven years where he has been zeroing in on his beloved buildings through binoculars.

Oh, and there's also the absence of news reports – since property mogul Arsénie Negovan's heart and health could take a nosedive if he suffers further trauma, his wife, nurse and lawyer make sure he does not receive bulletins or news releases (usually bad news) about his properties, his city of Belgrade, his country or the world. In other words, Arsénie Negovan is completely uninformed of events between the Nazis having been forced out of Belgrade at the end of World War ll and the prevailing modern Communist government in the

year 1968.

Then crisis hits: Arsénie overhears his wife and lawyer talking in whispers about the impending destruction of one of his apartment houses. What, his dear Simonida is to be torn down! (Mr. Negovan gives women's names to his properties - Sophia, Eugénie, Christina, Emilia, Serafina, Agatha, Barbara, Daphne, Anastasia, Juliana, Theodora, Irina, Xenia, Eudoxia, Angelina - and looks lovingly on each one of them as an urban goddesses). Arsénie will not let it happen; he resorts to drastic measures. Unbeknownst to his wife and everyone else, he dips into his closet and puts on his very formal suit complete with tuxedo tails, his 1940s top hat, grabs his cane with a handle in the form of a silver greyhound's muzzle and hits the Belgrade 1968 streets – a seventy-seven year old man on a mission.

Arsénie Negovan cuts quite the figure – what the formally attired old man sees and hears, the reactions to his demands about his building (actually the building has been taken over by the state many years ago) makes for one of the more humorous bits of the novel. At one point the wife of his former building caretaker takes him to task: ""Get out of here, and tell those who sent you that the Martinovi?i have nothing more for you to confiscate. You can still get this!" She brandished her clenched fist. "Just look at him, all dressed up with a hat and a tie! Don't you think I can tell a secret policeman when I see one?"" For the one and only Arsénie Negovan, prime builder of this very city, to be spoken to in such a manner. Outrageous! More than outrageous since never in his life has he ever been remotely associated with lowly organizations such as the police.

The entire novel consists of Arsénie Negovan's written account of his own life and events stretching back to 1919, the year this man of houses witnessed another ugly riot with a mob carrying scythes, hammers, placards and red banners, this time in the Ukraine. Up there in his apartment, in self-imposed exile, his extensive notes, including a last will and testament, are written on the back of rent receipts and accounting forms. Quite the irony here since author Borislav Peki? was reduced to writing his novels on toilet paper while serving a five year prison term for his involvement in the Union of Democratic Youth in Yugoslavia.

As perhaps to be expected, at the heart of Arsénie's account is his very personal relationship with his houses. Not only does he bestow a feminine name to each but his houses are his very sense of identity. Indeed, in his case "the Possessor becomes the Possessed without losing any of the traditional function of Possession, and the Possessed becomes the Possessor, without in any way losing its characteristics of the Possessed."

The more we read it becomes clear this is a tale of obsession. And with a tragicomic dimension in that Arsénie is blind to the way ownership of property is inextricably bound to the forces of politics and economics. Arsénie proclaims: "A man who builds houses or owns them cannot be party to a war. For him all wars are alien." Yet again another instance of irony, since, as Barry Schwabsky points out in his *Introduction* to this *New York Review Books* edition: "Peki? considered Communism to be one of those delusions, yet from a Marxist viewpoint, his novel can be considered a study of bourgeois self-deception."

Houses is an absorbing first-person narrative with many highly dramatic episodes. There's the time Arsénie refuses to leave his window to go to the cellar when bombs are exploding all over Belgrade - his houses are in danger and through a sheer act of will he offers them courage by remaining at his post. Months later he's elated and turns into a giddy little boy watching German tanks leave Belgrade, leaving his Agatha, Jillana, Christina and other houses in peace. Then again caught in another riot, this time in 1968, along the very same streets of that detestable 1941 riot. Arsénie words of passion: "*They* always demanded the same thing. *They* wanted my houses. *They* wanted them in March 1941 and *They* wanted them now in June of 1968!"

Widening the lens, *Houses* is a deeply penetrating insight into the clash of ideologies in those tumultuous

mid-twentieth century years of Yugoslavian history, a novel with a special appeal for anyone interested in the fate of Eastern Europe. Borislav Peki? maintained an unflinching skepticism respecting notions of “progress” or “advancement” of “improvement” attained through the march of history. His perspective comes through loud and clear in *Houses*. Highly recommend. Special thanks to translator Bernard Johnson for rendering the Serbo-Croatian into a fluid, readable English.

Serbian author Borislav Peki?, 1930-1992

Arsénie Negovan on Simonida, his much-loved apartment building: “My last-born, the lovely Greek Simonida with her fine dark countenance, her milky complexion beneath deep blue eyelids, and her full-blooded lips pierced by a bronze chain, African style. Simonida with her old-fashioned perfumes, penetrating, heavy, moist like musk, hung about with the ornaments given her by her spiritual father, the War Ministry engineer and architect Danilo Vladisavljevi?, and with those whitish streaks across her body characteristic of both convalescents from kidney disease and old houses."

David says

Peki? provides a fascinating, modern version of the interplay among reality, illusion, and delusion equal in form and delivery if not scope to *Don Quixote*. The story of Arsenie Negovan, property owner, is a tragedy of a life deeply conflicted between attachments to houses and the idea of advancing civilization through architecture and a petty selfishness Negovan attempts to overcome but never quite succeeds. The latter, combined with his own insecurities, ultimately led Negovan to withdraw from any sort of public life following a brief, violent encounter with a mob of anti-collaborationist, communist, and socialists shortly before the German invasion of Yugoslavia. Arsenie withdraws to his flat, contemplating his various properties through binoculars and detailed records, even as they are expropriated by the post-war socialist government of Tito or demolished during his self-imposed exile. The book examines his last day where Arsenie is confronted with reality, and the narrative beautifully captures the destruction of his carefully imposed order. While flawed and sometimes arrogant, there is something unspeakably tragic about the 77-year old man writing out his last narrative, will, and testament on the backs of rent books and account ledgers of the houses he loved like children.

Arsenie is only one member of the vast Negovan dynasty Peki? spent a modest portion of his fictional life chronicling. The vast, complicated family experienced as many rises and falls as the disparate Slavic peoples that made the, relatively, short-lived Yugoslav state. Their history is briefly touched on in *Houses*, but it is unfortunate Peki?'s *The Golden Fleece* detailing the history of the Negovans is not available in English translation.

Aleksandar Obradovi? says

Genijalno!

Eva D. says

Wonderful narrative about the changing social atmosphere of post WWII Yugoslavia. The book parallels the Belgrade student riots of 1968 with the unrest caused by the Hitler/Yugo pact of 1941 and the Bolshevik uprising in 1919. It's framed as a confession/will by an insane bourgeois house owner. Pekic's language is mesmerizing, and the book grips you as he traces the slow deterioration of the narrator's sanity.

Gary Rowlands says

Available through New York Review Books classic series under the title "Houses".

Arsenie Negovan, a seventy-seven year old owner of several houses in Belgrade, leaves his residence for the first time in 27 years to visit his many houses. His philosophical world view crashes against reality.

Caution: Avoid the introduction by Barry Schwabsky or a best read it after you finish the book. Let Arsenie's quest guide you.

Ken says

Narrated through property owner Arsénie Negovan as he reflects on he’s life and love of buildings whilst he’s nearing the end of he’s life.
He lovely cared for all of he’s houses, even to the point where he individually names them all.

Set through the majority of the 20th century. I practically liked how this was the core of the novel, with the numerous wars and conflicts being the back drop.

It’s a fascinating read set in a wonderful region in Europe.

Nikola says

Svaka ?ast Peki?u na ume?u da ve? dosadnu temu na?ini smrtno dosadnom knjigom...

Bill says

Yet another wonderful find by NYRB Classics. I love their books and own over 150 of them.

Pekic was born in what was then Yugoslavia, and this book was first published in 1970. It's a relatively short novel and a fairly unusual one at that. For one thing there is virtually no discernible plot, and really only one important character, the narrator himself (and of course, his houses).

The book is called Houses because his houses are all that matters to him. They are all named, and all with

female names (all 49 of them). He actually treats them and cares for them as if they were women. When they fall into disrepair, he says they are ill. His wife, who is really a secondary character compared to the houses, is jealous of them, as he spends way more time dealing with them than he does with her.

I can't really say too much else, without ruining it for any prospective readers, so I will just say that I really enjoyed it, and if you like literature in translation, or just feel like reading something different, I would highly recommend this book.

Bojan says

It can be hard for English reader to catch up with all (ideological, political, esthetic...) layers of this wonderful novel. Even though narration is quite simple - given through the perspective of only one narrator, the clash between the reality (well known to local readers) and the delusion of the main character is what brings the beauty of the tragedy and what makes this book complex and worthy of reading again.
Smart humor is given here through a parody of the headline of Erich Fromm's book "To Be or to Have". A man, a capitalist, a ruthless house-owner, not knowing that communist revolution has happened more than 20 years ago, and that he is "freed" of his ownership, still believes that "to be is to have" and "to have is to be". His eloquence and his don-quijotesque, delusional relationship towards reality makes him likable even though his deeds present him as a real anti-hero.
This is what only great writers can do.
Pardon my English.

Ana Daji? says

„Naši gradovi su ti dušu dali za gra?anske ratove, kao da su pravljeni da se na ulicama koljemo: poslovni centar sa trgovinama i nadleštvima, pa zaštitni pojas gra?anskih domova, a onda radni?ki kvartovi, ali i oni su opkoljeni gradskim letnjikovcima, iza kojih opet vrebaju seljaci. U tim koncentri?nim krugovima živi se jedan drugom iza le?a, red po red smenjuju se bogatstvo i nemaština, red gospode – red fukare, pa opet red gospode i unedogled tako, kao godovi u drvetu, kao kriške... kriške zatrovanog vo?a.“
