

AUTHOR NOTES: RESEARCHING THE DEER WEDDING

The novel focuses on events in two specific periods of Croatian history: 1941 and the setting up of the first Independent State of Croatia and 1998 when a second attempt at independence was forged, following the Yugoslav wars of 1991 – 1995.

I'd travelled to Croatia in 1998, nearly three years after the war had ended, at the invitation of ELAN Wales, a theatre company who were staging an adaptation of *The Tempest* on the island of Hvar as part of a Shakespeare Festival. Whilst the war was over in Croatia, hostilities were growing in Kosovo, threatening the region's fragile peace, and earlier that same year there had been a run on the main bank in the country, which had collapsed causing economic turmoil. There had been a small recovery in the number of tourists visiting the Dalmatian coast, but that was affected again the following year with the situation in Kosovo deteriorating still further and the death of Croatia's President Tudjman.

What was fascinating was meeting people who were just emerging from the troubles; the UN still had personnel monitoring various parts of the country and there were many refugees and displaced people still living on the island in the hotels and on the mainland in Split. There was a strong belief amongst many that joining the European Union was a route into the future; there was also national pride building from success in the international sporting arena (football and tennis in particular). I was a journalist at the time, and I received funding from British Council Zagreb to cover the visit of ELAN Wales and to write about the forging of links between a young Croatia and countries such as Wales, another small nation state. The places I visited and the people I met affected me very much and I found later when I revisited the journals I kept at the time (and re-reading the journalism I created at that period) I had the bones of a story.

I went to Zagreb, Split and to Hvar, an island on the Dalmatian Coast. Each of these places features in the novel. In Split, I came across the work of Ivan Meštrović who inspires my central character Antun Fisković, in addition to the poignant, but crumbling remains of the Jewish Cemetery near the Marjan Hills. In Zagreb, I visited a gallery specialising in Croatia's naïve artists, which gave me the idea for *The Deer Wedding*.

My interest in this part of the world was also inspired by an earlier visit to Slovenia in 1993 where I was making a short documentary for BBC Wales' programme The Slate. Slovenia managed to win its independence when the old Yugoslavia broke up with relatively little upheaval, but during our visit it was very evident there was trouble in neighbouring countries. The top floor of our hotel in Ljubljana was given over to refugees from the conflict and our camera man and sound recordist had just come back from Bosnia. Refugees caught up in the war came to the show we were reporting on, *i and i* a dance-theatre production by Earthfall inspired by the murder of a young couple who had tried to flee Sarajevo during the war and were shot dead. They were known in the media as Sarajevo's Romeo and Juliet.

What interested me was how a country like Croatia, a place many people I knew had travelled to as students, could implode into such violence; how history is still a living (and unspent) force for many and how it might be possible to trace out a future when so much has been broken and destroyed. Can a country torn apart by war ever know peace? And was the price paid for independence really worth it?