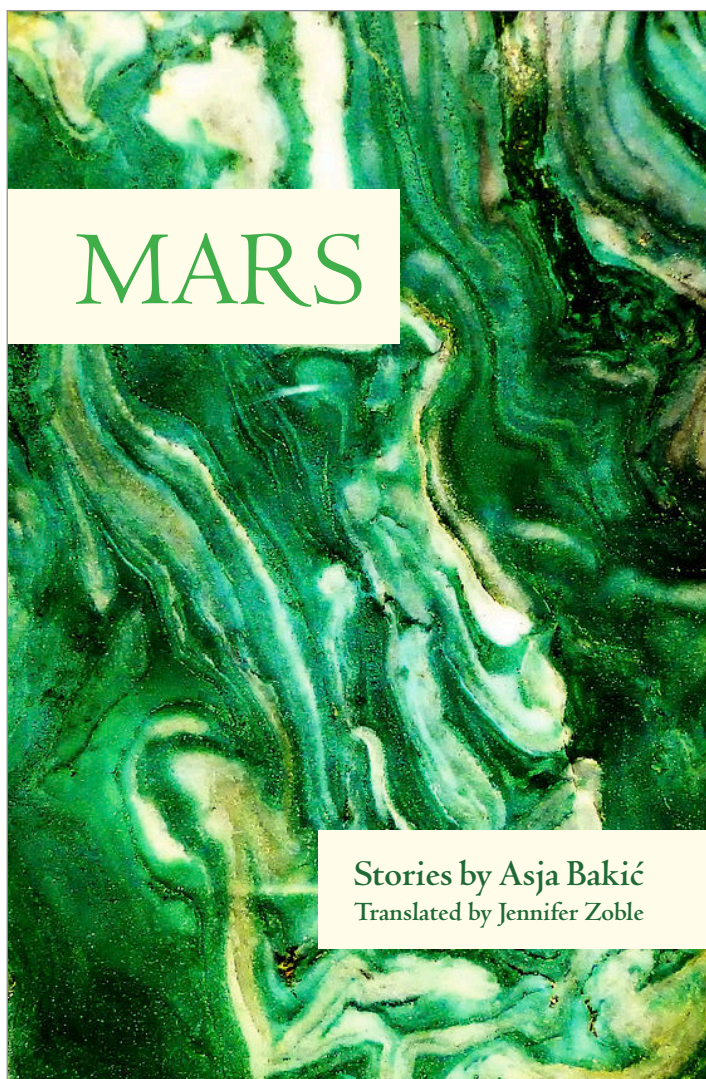


# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

## MARS

ASJA BAKIĆ | Translated by Jennifer Zoble  
Published March 19, 2019 by the Feminist Press

978-1-93693-248-1 pbk • 978-1-93693-249-8 ebook • 168 pgs • \$16.95



## CONTENTS

Linguistic and  
Geographical Background 2

Glossary of Terms  
and Places 3

Discussion Questions 5

Notes on Excerpts 7

## LINGUISTIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND



**ASJA BAKIĆ** was born in the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina and currently lives in Croatia. *Mars* was originally written in Croatian.

Bosnia and Croatia are bordering countries located in Southeastern Europe, east of Italy and west of Serbia. They border the Adriatic Sea—the northernmost arm of the Mediterranean Sea.

Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia were all part of Yugoslavia until the 1990s, when after political and economic crisis and the rise of nationalism, Yugoslavia was divided by the creation of borders between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Macedonia.

Because of the close proximity of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, the variant languages with roots in Serbo-Croatian—the official language of Yugoslavia—are very similar and mutually understood both written and verbally. However, the variance in the languages has political significance as a tool to legitimize the states as independent nations.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND PLACES

**Durmitor** (3): Durmitor is a group of mountains—part of the Dinaric Alps—located in the northwestern part of Montenegro, with a summit that reaches a height of 2,523 meters.

**Luxury Easter egg** (6): Fabergé eggs were luxurious, finely decorated and jeweled Easter eggs created for the Russian Imperial family by a company run by Peter Carl Fabergé from 1885–1916. Many were commissioned by Czar Nicholas II, son of Czar Alexander III.

**Heraclitus** (15): Heraclitus of Ephesus was a Greek pre-Socratic philosopher of the Persian Empire, famous for his theories of human logic and reason and for the aphorism “No man ever steps in the same river twice.”

**Njegoš** (18): Prince Bishop of Montenegro, poet and philosopher of the nineteenth century, whose works are widely appreciated in Serbian and Montenegrin literature.

**Lichen** (35): Pronounced “like-en.” A composite organism, formed from a mutualistic relationship between algae and fungi, that grows on walls, trees and rocks. It resembles a plant and can be various colors, sometimes leafy and sometimes a leafless branch.

**Speaking Clock** (46): Before automated voice recorder technology became widespread, human operators would serve as speaking clocks. Anyone can call to hear the very specific time (year, month, day, hour, minute, second). The service was introduced in the 1930s.

**D. Elmiger** (64): May refer to Dorothee Elmiger, a German-Swiss writer, author of *Invitation to the Bold of Heart*, which won the Kelag Prize and the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 2010. She was also awarded the Swiss Literature Award by the Federal Office of Culture and the Erich-Fried-Preis.

**Geppetto** (75): Mister Geppetto is a fictional character from the Italian children’s novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. He is an old man and a woodcarver who crafts Pinocchio into a little boy, becoming his “father.”

**Lady Kasa** (94): Kasa no Iratsume was a Japanese waka poet of the early eighth century. Her twenty-nine surviving poems are works addressed to a lover.

**Medea** (88, 102): In Greek mythology, Medea is often portrayed as a sorceress or a priestess of the goddess Hecate. Medea was gifted with prophecy, which she used to help Jason, leader of the Argonauts, whom she later married. When Jason abandoned her for Glauce, Medea took revenge by sending Glauce poisoned clothing, then murdering her own children.

**Wild West** (107): The Wild West refers to the mythical “untamed” territories west of the Mississippi River in North America in the nineteenth century. Thought to be a place where outlaws lived without rules, it was also a site of Native American displacement as the US expanded its territory.

***The Belly Of Paris*** (134): The third novel in Émile Zola’s twenty-volume series *Les Rougon-Macquart*, originally published in 1873 in France, in which Zola weaves food into aspects of everyday life in nineteenth-century Paris.

**Ancona** (138): a city and seaport in central Italy, across the Adriatic Sea from Croatia.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the opening story, “Day Trip to Durmitor,” Tristesa and Zubrowka express strong ideas about the role of literature, calling it, for example, the primary link between life and death (14). Why do you think Bakić begins the collection with such perspectives on writing and literature? After reading the rest of the stories in this collection, what do you think of the secretaries’ statements on the power of literature?
2. The book’s afterword situates the stories of *Mars* into the literary tradition of speculative fiction. What are some of the social problems, cultural questions, and other topics that Bakić seems to be “speculating” about through these stories?
3. The feminization of robots has a long history in popular culture; consider the films *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, and *Ex Machina* and the virtual assistant products Siri and Alexa. How does the story “Abby” enter into and/or speak back to this legacy?
4. “Asja 5.0” depicts a society where sexual pleasure has not been experienced in a long time. How do the characters Krenga, Asja, and her clone present different ideas about sexuality—about how and why to be sexual? How do gender and class affect the ways these characters experience (or do not experience) sexual pleasure?
5. In “Carnivore,” Milan craves meat with every meal and is even attracted to the woman on the bus because of her meaty smell. What does meat seem to signify in this story? What is its relationship to masculinity, femininity, and sexuality? What does the strange woman’s promise of “fresh meat” (75) have to do with the surprising sexual situation in which Milan finds himself?
6. Many female writers in history have employed male pseudonyms so that their work would be better received. In “Passions,” however, the unnamed narrator, a writer, suspects that her friend Vanja wrote the novel attributed to her. Vanja is a figure of confusion; the narrator says, “I knew only that there was Vanja, the image of Vanja, corrected, that my eyes had deceived me, that I had deceived myself” (102). Who do you think Vanja is? Why is her gender ambiguity important in this story?

7. In “The Guest,” the narrator, a female journalist, disagrees with Carlyle about whether their shared power should be used to burn and begin again or to rebuild and improve what already exists. What is the root of their disagreement? What are the implications of each perspective?
8. Each story in *Mars* features a main female character who is identified by a name given to them by someone else (“Abby” and “Asja 5.0”) or described only by their relationship to others (mother, daughter, journalist, etc.). How noticeable is the namelessness of the female characters as you read? What do you think is the significance of this repeated namelessness?
9. The habitability of Mars for humans is a major international research goal, but the question of whether the human race *should* colonize Mars, if ever possible, remains highly contested. In the story “The Underworld,” why is Mars—a place so close to Earth and yet so alien—designated as an exile for writers? How does the relationship between the two planets in this story reflect or reimagine real-world problems like colonization, war, and border disputes?
10. The book’s title *Mars* is not shared by any of the stories. What do you think “Mars” means in the context of this collection? What elements of Bakić’s writing style evoke the sense of alienness that one might associate with the planet Mars?

## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 1

"I came to return your sweater."  
"Now? In such terrible weather?"  
"The weather is ideal."

Not human?  
Maybe she's  
a different  
entity. ←

She wasn't wet at all. It was like the storm had  
skipped over her completely: there wasn't a drop of  
water on her raincoat.

She was purposefully  
drenched last time  
so she could borrow  
the sweater. →

"Your sweater," she said.  
She pushed it under my nose.  
"There really wasn't any rush."

Double  
entendre ←

"I don't like debts."  
"Would you like something to drink?" I asked.  
"Sure."

The young woman wore her muddy boots  
through the entryway and into the living room, but  
she didn't care. She flung herself into an armchair and  
allowed me to watch her for some time in silence. My  
excitement grew palpable. The last time I'd been this  
excited was while beating that young man to death,  
the one who'd been found in the woods not long  
before. While I was killing him, I had to wipe my  
mouth with my sleeve every now and then because I  
couldn't stop salivating.

So intense,  
it's almost  
tangible ←

Shows that  
she has no  
respect for  
Liken. →

Is Liken  
excited  
about another  
kill or is this  
sexual  
attraction? ←

I briefly escaped to the kitchen to calm down.  
I forgot to make the tea. I was still clutching the  
sweater.

"Aren't you afraid of being out in this weather?"  
I asked the young woman. "The thunder is terrible."  
"I'm not afraid of thunder," she said.  
"Not one bit?"  
"Not one bit."

When serial  
killers speak  
in this way  
it is difficult  
to suspect that  
they are  
murderers. →

40



## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 1, continued

She acted so confidently, as if nothing could hurt her, as if nothing scared her. Not even me, though my appearance didn't exactly inspire trust.

She has no fear in taking revenge from a serial killer. Maybe she is a serial killer herself?

"Did you know the man who was murdered?" she asked suddenly.

Questioning if Liken had a personal vendetta or is a serial killer.

Her tone surprised me. It was accusing.

"Which one? They found two."

"The first one."

"I didn't. He wasn't from around here."

I was overtaken by suspicion. Maybe she worked for the police. She seemed intelligent. She would understand what the young policeman couldn't.

"It was shocking that they found the body so close to my house," I said calmly.

"It must've given you the creeps," she said. "Who wouldn't it."

The creeps? I didn't know what the creeps felt like. I'd never felt them.

Foreshadows that Liken may feel the creeps in the future.

"It did," I said. "It was awful."

This harsh statement may be alluding to the goddess of revenge and justice, Nemesis, who is also known to be remorseless.

While saying this, I felt a hole in my sweater. It was big enough to fit my index finger through. It seemed to have been made by a bullet.

"Your friend," the woman said, smiling, "was wearing that sweater when he died."

I looked at her in disbelief.

"I have no friends," I said.

"True," she said, "not anymore."

Juxtaposition with Liken's constant, compulsive lying.

We stared at each other across the table, where the young woman had propped her muddy boots. She was letting me know that she was now the master

A position of dominance.

41



## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 2

Therefore,  
there aren't  
many people  
who could've  
written *Passions*.  
The narrator  
has few  
acquaintances.

anything about my book in person, that he refrain from calling me repeatedly to see what I was doing or how I was feeling—surely it didn't surprise him. Commentary about me abounded: how I always appeared in the same clothes, how I wore a ring in the shape of a skull, how I left my house only at night. But the rumors didn't bother me. I didn't fill the papers—it wasn't that kind of talk. I wasn't in danger of ending up in the tabloids. I never got naked in public, never beat people up, although—I must admit—I often wanted to. I'd sometimes wake up with clenched, burning fists. Had I been a poet, I no doubt would've written about such things, but poetry didn't interest me. I didn't read it, and I didn't try to write it. Had my editor been a smarter man, the poetry would've given it away. It would've been instantly obvious that I wasn't the author of *Passions*. I never would've begun a book by quoting verse. Never.

But there it was—serving as the epigraph to “my” *Passions*, a very awkwardly chosen poem by some Japanese writer, some woman by the name of Kasa. Short, but irritating enough to piss me off:

(Allusion?)  
The emergence  
of novels in the  
18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>  
centuries  
shifted focus  
from dramatic  
occurrences of  
poetry and  
plays to the  
significance of  
mundane tasks  
and life.

“Hungry” may also  
refer to the “hungry  
ghost” concept in  
Buddhism where a  
soul is reborn as a  
hungry ghost if it has  
died unhappy.

To love someone  
Who loves you not  
Is like entering a temple  
And worshipping the walls behind  
The wooden statue  
Of the hungry devil

A “hungry devil”  
is someone who  
immensely desires love  
and attention, but will  
selfishly not love the  
lover back, feeling  
too important to  
notice its lover.

## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 2, continued

What was that supposed to mean? I hadn't a clue. I couldn't remember if Vanja read poetry. It suddenly seemed very important, maybe the most important element of all.

It turned out that Vanja was still using her old email, that nothing significant in her life had changed—she still used the same phone number, the same email address. Since I couldn't stand talking on the phone, I decided to write her an email. I didn't want to reveal too much. I asked whether she felt like getting together, we hadn't seen each other in so long, blah blah blah—the platitudes piled up. I'd even written *Dear Vanja* at the beginning, which wasn't a lie, but sounded insincere.

It took her three days to reply that she didn't have time, but as soon as she did, she'd get in touch about meeting up for a drink. I was nervous. I wrote back saying I had something important to discuss with her. I should've known she would call me right away. She asked what all this was about, but I didn't say. I proposed we meet that night. She declined.

"I can't meet before tomorrow," she muttered.

"What you can't do today can wait till tomorrow," I said, laughing like a moron.

I tried to prolong the conversation. I had to clutch the receiver with both hands—my palms were so clammy, it was like trying to hold a bar of soap.

"Tomorrow in the main square?" I asked.

"Okay, be there at five. We have a lot of work to do, so I can't stay long."

The narrator can only think of Vanja as the anonymous author b/c Vanja is the only person she ever liked.

Vanja's disinterest in the narrator and lack of a sincere response contradicts the epigraph and foreshadows that Vanja isn't the anonymous author.

The narrator has a crush on Vanja and is nervous of rejection. Secretly, she wishes Vanja to be the anonymous author.