

the Tiger's Wife by Téa Obreht.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson 2011.

the Tiger's Wife won its twenty five year old author the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2011, a significant feat for a young author and a first time novel. There is always a slight risk in such cases that the book in question, lauded to the heights by the literati, will turn out to be a deep disappointment to ordinary readers. It is a pleasure to confirm, in my subjective opinion, that having completed the Tiger's Wife it is all too apparent why it has received the plaudits and garlands that have come its way.

The story of the Tiger's Wife is set in the Balkans across several time periods, and the experiences of its narrator, a doctor called Natalia, are interwoven with those of her beloved grandfather from his birth to his death. As those who have read other books set in the post-civil war Balkans will attest, this is a deeply atmospheric novel, which takes the reader into a captivating emotional and geographical landscape.

The eponymous tiger escapes from the City zoo (the City is never identified though one imagines it stands for Belgrade) during a bombardment and finds its way into the country; it is old and thoroughly institutionalized after many years in captivity but back in the wild some of its old instincts begin to assert themselves. It encounters the local village butcher who is a brutal man, and his deaf-mute wife who secretly feeds it and with whom it develops an affinity. Attempts to track down the tiger and kill it are comical and tragic, and the butcher's wife herself, after her husband's mysterious death, falls prey to village rumour, superstition and gossip.

The other strand of the novel, and for me the more powerful and haunting is the tale of the deathless man, for more about whom it will be necessary to read the book!

This is a marvellous, clever and subtle novel, full of atmosphere, replete with some age-old fictional themes like love, loss and loyalty and with more than a sprinkling of mystery that makes the story linger in the mind long after the book has been finished. I shall await Téa Obreht's next book with the greatest anticipation.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh