

NIMISHA DOONGARWAL

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Collage on panel, 12 x 12 in.



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CATHERINE SEGURSON

International Perspectives

An Interview with author Josip Novakovich

Josip Novakovich emigrated from Croatia to the United States at the age of twenty. He has published a dozen books, including a novel, *April Fool's Day* (Harper, 2004), which has been translated into ten languages, five story collections (*Infidelities* [Harper Perennial, 2005], *Yolk* [Graywolf Press, 1995], *Salvation and Other Disasters* [Graywolf Press, 1998], *Heritage of Smoke* [Dzanc Books, 2017], and *Tumbleweed* [Esplanade Books, 2017]), and three collections of narrative essays, as well as two books of practical criticism. His work was anthologized in *Best American Poetry*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *O. Henry Prize Stories*. He has received the Whiting Award, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Ingram Merrill Award, and an American Book Award, and in 2013 he was a Man Booker International Award finalist. He has taught at Penn State, University of Cincinnati, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and now teaches creative writing at Concordia University in Montreal. His most recent novel, *Rubble of Rubles*, was published in December of 2022 by Dzanc Books.

CATHERINE SEGURSON: Let's start with where you're at now. I'm really interested in your latest novel, *Rubble of Rubles* (Dzanc Books), which came out in 2022.

JOSIP NOVAKOVICH: Oh, yes. And I actually have another book coming this year in December 2023. It's called *Vignettes, Stories about Wine*.

CS: Oh, exciting! A story collection?

JN: It's basically anecdotes and very short stories about people drinking wine, mostly wine. And so, because *vignette* actually comes from *wine*, I thought . . . So, that's the title.

CS: That sounds like a wonderful book. Something I think Californians would like to read.

JN: Yeah, I think so. I still need to write a California wine story. I think I did enough research to write one.

The more serious book is *Rubble of Rubles*, even though it's a satirical book. I mean, if you write about the Russians, even realistically, it'll sound like satire because it's such a ridiculous country in many ways. Russia is so strange, bizarre, with some amazing stuff and some really terrible stuff simultaneously going on. And so it was pretty easy to try to write this book in the absurdist, ironic satirical style, and hopefully in a humorous way, about Russia from 2006 to 2008, when Putin restricted all imports from Georgia. And for a while you couldn't buy any wine in Russia whatsoever. I was in St. Petersburg then, but pretty soon they gave up on that project because you can't keep Russians away from their bottle—the regime will collapse.

CS: You began this novel in 2006–2008, and so you worked on it for about ten years?

JN: Well, it took that long to publish it. I didn't work on it that long. It had several incarnations. The first version was much longer, lots of anecdotes, but my agent thought I needed to streamline it, and it got rejected by the major publishers in that shape. So I trimmed it down and streamlined around the plot. Another agent asked me to turn it into a spy novel, a clear genre thing. And it's not

that. And so we had some disagreements. I decided after that to sell it without an agent. And a literary press called Dzanc took it. Several literary presses wanted it at the same time, and I could have published it a year earlier, which would've been before the war. Now it seems like the novel is plagiarizing the war, while in fact it was kind of predicting some of the outrageous stuff. With Putin, for example, in my novel he has a double, and we now know he does have a double for security reasons. I didn't know that when I wrote the novel.

CS: So Putin is a fictional character in your book, as well as his double?

JN: Yes. And I also have an expat, an American who has some Eastern European roots. The American character wants to discover his Russian soul, except through research, he finds out that the Russian soul is the plagiarism of the German soul. The German Romantics, Schelling and company, came up with the concept of the German soul. And then Gogol translated it into Russian. The Russian soul became such a big concept, mystical and mysterious. People believe in the Russian soul, but it's just like many other things in Russia, a plagiarism.

CS: You must've enjoyed writing the satirical Putin character and making up crazy things for him to do.

JN: He's there in maybe three chapters. So he's not the main character, but he definitely is taking up maybe forty pages. Yes, I had a lot of fun writing the Putin character.

CS: Your main character is the American tourist?

JN: Yes, the American former businessman who lost all his money because he invested in Enron. He lost money for the clients, so he was chased out of the business. First, it started as a challenge to write a noir set in St. Petersburg.

I actually wrote a noir story set in Croatia, for the *Zagreb Noir* anthology [Akashic Books, 2015]; I wrote about soccer because Croatians are so crazy about soccer and there's always a threat of soccer violence. But for Russia, noir seemed to be very easy and simple to write because I remembered, for example, seeing a corpse that was on the

sidewalk just behind the Kazan Cathedral, basically center of St. Petersburg. The corpse was there in the morning. Then I saw the same corpse at noon then again in the afternoon and early evening too. And then finally somebody picked it up. There were thousands of people passing by this corpse and completely ignoring it, like it was perfectly natural to have a corpse in the middle of the street. So that image started it for me, and in a way, started the novel. In the old draft it was the first chapter, seeing the dead body, but then I moved it to third chapter for no serious reason at all, really. When you sit on a manuscript that should have already been published, you keep changing things even though maybe you're not improving the novel anymore, but you feel, "Okay, if I change something, make it better, then I'll publish it." So I was spinning in circles a little bit, revising the novel.

CS: And your main character, he ends up in a Russian prison at one point.

JN: Right. He is accused of killing Georgian wine importers, because he was in a cab ride and the cab runs over a Georgian man who happens to be a wine importer. And so he's falsely accused. My Putin character, when he visits the prison, asks everybody in prison why they're there. And when he finds out that David, the American expat, is there because he killed the two Georgian wine importers, Putin says, "Well, that's fantastic. They should all be killed. You are my hero. So you are leaving the prison right now and you're going to work for me." So he wants David to go to Georgia and to assassinate Zourabichvili, the Georgian president. That's the basic plot idea.

CS: Fantastic. I remember when you read this section at our conference, when Putin visits the prison, and everyone loved your reading. I don't want to give away the ending, but the whole novel seems to just flow really easily.

JN: I hope so. Partly because half of it is just dialogue. I used to be scared of dialogue because I write in English as a second language. And while I could do dialogue easily in my native language, Croatian, I could not have confidence in doing the speaking dialect realistically in English. And so I don't rely on dialect, but I do rely on

the logic and twists and turns that can happen in a conversation. And now I find dialogue easier to write than a plain narrative, because it's like a ping-pong. There's a question, and you have to answer it, or you can ignore to answer it and say something else. There's always potential for a lot of dynamics in dialogue. So I enjoyed writing it that way. In the initial draft, I had lots of historical anecdotes. I still have some, but my editors complained that there were too many, and so I removed some, and maybe that's why it flows better now, because I don't have that many digressions.

CS: This is your first novel in your dozen published books. Until this book you've been mainly a short story writer.

JN: I've always mostly written short stories. Maybe because I have ADD or something. I'm not sure. But this is my second published novel. I have written one more, which I am not trying to publish.

CS: How many collections of short stories do you have?

JN: Six short story collections and three essay collections.

CS: That's quite a bit. When did you start writing? How old were you?

JN: I was twenty-four at the time. I was in a PhD program in philosophy, and I was frustrated by reading so many boring theology and philosophy texts, mostly translated from the German and French. So I started reading literature and found it natural, energetic, and interesting compared with the abstractions of the philosophical texts. I actually dropped out of the PhD program in philosophy and started writing. It just so happened that at the time, there was a competition at Vassar College for the graduates, and I graduated from there. I wrote 250 pages of recollections of my hometown, mostly my backyard, because we had a huge yard and odd neighbors.

CS: This was set in Croatia, right?

JN: Yes. We had a frog pond, my father was a beekeeper—there were thirty beehives—and there were all kinds

of things going on there. Maybe out of nostalgia, I described the backyard and all the little events happening there. And big ones too, like the death of my father. It was a pretty loose manuscript, but I submitted for this competition and won \$10,000. And now the same competition is like \$60,000.

CS: Wow, congratulations on that. So that was your big break?

JN: At the time, \$10,000 in 1984, it was a lot of money. I took that money and basically ran. I dropped out of school and traveled in Europe for a year. I went to an art colony in France, I rented an apartment in Budapest for two months. I didn't go to Yugoslavia because I would've been drafted in the army most likely. But I had this thirst for travel and geography. This was before computers. So I was writing on typewriters and when my typewriter broke, I wasted a lot of time. But I wrote a few stories there, and I got the idea that I would actually try to make writing my main job or career. When I got back to New York, first I rented an apartment, and when I ran out of money, I got a part-time job doing word processing for Smith Barney. It was an investment firm that no longer exists. There I would also have access to the computers after hours. I could stay there and type up my stories because computers used to be very expensive, relatively speaking.

CS: You composed fiction after hours at Smith Barney investment bank's corporate headquarters in New York?

JN: Exactly. It was on the fiftieth floor on Sixth Avenue with a great view. I wrote there, and I could stay all night if I wanted, plus phone calls were expensive then, and I could call Croatia for free. But they tried to bill my brother for the phone calls. They sent him the bill. He says, "What is this?" And I say, "Just ignore it." And they couldn't go to Croatia to collect.

CS: And so this turned into your first book, a short story collection of stories set in Croatia?

JN: Yes, it is titled *Yolk* [Graywolf Press, 1995]. Many of them were actually stories that were developed from my

initial manuscript on the backyard in Croatia. On the cover there is a bird, because in the book, there's a story about a hawk, and the style of the cover art is very folkloric. Some of the stories come from my childhood and are almost memoiristic or what these days people would call autofiction. There are even some war stories, because the war started to happen in Croatia at the time I was writing, and I had to imagine what it was like being there. There's a story about losing a passport in Budapest, but it is mostly all Croatia.

CS: And the story collection *Yolk* was published in 1995, about ten years after you won the Vassar prize.

JN: Yes. It took a while because I had manuscripts ready, but I didn't know how to publish or approach agents or anything, and I didn't want to go to a creative writing program. And I lived very close to Columbia, Upper West Side, and at the Hungarian pastry shop, I would meet people studying writing at Columbia for a master's. And I laughed at them. I said, "Really? You need to go to school for that? You think that Chekov went to a writing program?" And I said, "No, you're better off just writing." That's what I thought. But then I realized that you could get a fellowship to go to a writing program, and it was a cold winter, so I wanted to go somewhere warm. And so I went to the University of Texas at Austin partly for the better climate and partly for the contacts. I realized I needed contacts to publish. It was not so simple as I thought. At first when I wrote, I didn't think of selling anything or publishing. I wrote for the pleasure of it, and then of course, eventually after I needed to make a living, I figured out that if I could sell my writing, then I could keep writing. And so that's why I went to the writing program. The writing program was helpful, but I'm just explaining the gap and the timing.

CS: After the prize, and before you published your first collection, you had gone through the MFA program in Austin, Texas? And did you make connections with other writers there like you thought you would?

JN: I did. Plus I learned how to submit stories. At first I didn't realize that sometimes magazines took a whole

year to respond. In NYC, where I started submitting stories, I didn't give a forwarding address when I left from one place to another. So I don't know, maybe some of those stories were accepted even before my going to Austin. I will never know.

CS: Then shortly after *Yolk* you published a nonfiction book called *Fiction Writer's Workshop* (Story Press, 1998).

JN: Yes, I actually wrote it even before I published my short story collections. When I moved to Cincinnati to teach at the University of Cincinnati, I had book contracts with Paris Review editions. They used to publish books also with British American Publishing. Anyway, I got to Cincinnati and the editor of *Story Magazine*, Lois Rosenthal, said, "Oh, great. You moved to the city and you're teaching creative writing, and would you mind coming to my office? We'll discuss you possibly writing a book for me. You must have notes, lecture notes. So if you could just put it all together, write a very practical book that people could buy and learn how to write on their own." I said, "Sure, no problem." And so initially, in the introduction I wrote, "You don't need to go to the writing program, just read a lot and read a craft book like this one, do the exercises, the sketches, and you definitely don't need to go to a writing program." And Lois said, "Well, that was our initial idea, but you'll be selling mostly to people who go to writing programs. So do take that out of the introduction because you'll try to sell there too. Don't eliminate part of your market." And the book sold well, maybe a hundred thousand copies by now.

CS: A hundred thousand. That's great. Wow!

JN: That includes the second edition. In the second edition I added the anthology of stories in the back so that it would be a complete book with paradigms of how and what to write. And it was translated into Italian, Croatian, Bulgarian, and even Indonesian.

CS: People can still get that book today as well.

JN: Yes. Penguin has taken over from the Story Press, and they keep it in print. I talked to them about doing a new

edition, but then we lost touch. I actually don't feel like doing another edition now because, well, I've written too much about the craft, and it's not the most exciting thing to do.

CS: But you teach fiction writing workshops all over the world yourself. And that's how I met you originally, I was attending your creative writing workshop.

JN: In Lithuania, right?

CS: Yes, you were teaching a fiction writing workshop in Lithuania in 2011. That's where we met.

JN: That was a great place. I miss Vilnius. How about you?

CS: Oh, Vilnius was beautiful. I liked going around to all the museums and learning the cultural history. They preserve their culture really well there.

JN: True. The old town looks like it is still in the Middle Ages. I remember you were going to a coffee shop where I was going every morning because they had good coffee. That surprised me. I thought that in Eastern Europe, it would be impossible to get good coffee, but the coffee was fantastic.

CS: Yes, that's how we became friends, you were always there at the coffee place. It was like espresso and macchiato with a bit of chocolate.

JN: Right!

CS: And by now you have taught all over the world, and you've even taught creative writing in Kenya a number of times.

JN: Yes. I was supposed to teach there this December, but because of the travel advisory due to potential terrorism it may be postponed until July. Quebec winter is pretty brutal, but in July, the weather here is perfect. I don't need to go anywhere in July.

CS: Oh, except in July of 2023 when you came to the

Catamaran conference, you were escaping the fires in Canada then right?

JN: It's funny because two years before, you could have been escaping the fires in California by going to Quebec, but things have changed.

CS: And I also had you teach in 2021 when our Catamaran conference was in Santa Cruz.

JN: Yeah, I really loved it. I think Pebble Beach is even more sensational than Santa Cruz. It's more contained. The conference in Santa Cruz kind of disappears into the city, and it's not so concentrated like your campus in Pebble Beach, where it really feels like a community.

CS: We only did it one year in Santa Cruz during the pandemic, because Pebble Beach was closed. So you taught that year.

JN: Yeah. And it's funny that I think there was a relief from the pandemic only for one month, because things shut down right after it again, right?

CS: And we had the conference that one month, and then everything shut down again. We got lucky.

JN: That summer, in 2021, I think people were really extra grateful that they got to do something in real life rather than on Zoom.

CS: And I noticed last year, 2023 in Pebble Beach, we had the highest number of people in any of the ten years because I think the same thing is they're happy to be able to get out and do real life things all of a sudden.

JN: Yeah. I mean, you probably noticed that if you traveled, that airports are more crowded than ever. Everybody's so antsy after COVID going all over the world.

CS: You must be happy as well to be able to travel more for your creative writing workshops. You do that but also teach regularly in Montreal. How long have you been teaching up in Montreal? You've been there a while.

JN: I think I was beginning to teach there when I met you in Lithuania, so for about twelve years. Before that, I was teaching at Penn State, and before that at the University of Cincinnati. And so my direction is completely wrong, starting in Texas with the very warm climate. Cincinnati, moderate. The hills of Pennsylvania, central Pennsylvania, are really cold and gloomy, and then Montreal freezing. So I think I'm running out of geography going north, unless I end up in Iceland. Actually, I was invited to teach for one semester in Reykjavik but I didn't do that.

CS: What are your plans for your writing now? Are you working on a new book?

JN: I'm revising a novel that is also very old and trying to give it a new life set in World War I on the Eastern Front, partly because it's such a murky territory. It is an expressionistic, surrealistic war novel, maybe slightly comic, if I can manage it. *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek is a novel I really admire. And it encouraged some other comic writing about the wars, namely *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut. They all acknowledged the influence of Jaroslav Hašek. So, it's possible to write about something really sad and tragic in the satirical and comic way.

CS: It's a satirical war novel set in 1914–15 in Russia?

JN: It's mostly a surrealistic war novel, and it's partly set in Przemyśl, which was in the news as the transit station between Ukraine and Poland, where Ukrainian refugees in the beginning were going. Well, probably three million people have gone through that train station. But in the First World War, neither Poland nor Ukraine officially existed. It was the borderland between Russia and Austria-Hungary. And Przemyśl was a fortress town where the Austrian soldiers, when they lost some battles at the beginning of the war, surprisingly driven back by Russians, they retreated to this fortress town and the Russians surrounded them and starved them. It was like the siege of Troy almost, except not that long. The Austrian soldiers were running out of food, so they even ate their horses.

CS: Oh this really happened? Then you're basing your story on real events.

JN: That really happened. And the attraction for me is that it's such a strange, surreal situation. They even joked. What's the difference between Przemyśl and Troy? Troy, you enter the belly of a horse and a horse entered Przemyśl in your belly.

CS: These events inspire some of the scenes in your new novel?

JN: Yes, some of the groundwork. Another impetus: one of my grandfathers was a soldier on the Eastern Front in World War I. He died before I was born. I wish I'd had a chance to interview him, but I heard he didn't like to talk about the war. So I know nothing about his experiences. I can only imagine. He could have even been in Przemyśl. There were lots of Croatian soldiers there.

CS: You've had such a long writing career and you've won some awards and gotten a Booker Prize nomination. What was that like? The Booker Prize nomination and the prestigious awards and all that?

JN: I got a lot of attention in Canadian Press and Croatian press—articles, interviews. And I got a free trip to London, hung out there. It was kind of nice, but I think it was mostly distracting. At that time, I had a fellowship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and I think it would've been better if I didn't have that distraction, if I could just sit down and write and research. But instead, I traveled and I was getting assignments. The *Times Literary Supplement* got in touch with me to write a review of three Croatian novels. And the *Daily Beast* gave me an assignment to write a travel story from St. Petersburg, Russia. That was all fun, but it was also distracting. I wish I had been working on a novel instead. This nomination was for the Booker International Prize, for my body of work. [At the time,] they considered work either directly written in English or in translation. Now for the Booker International Prize, the books must not be written in English but have to be in translation, and there's a different Booker Prize for a single book in the English language.

CS: You write primarily in English. So now you'd have to have written your books in Croatian and have them translated to qualify again?

JN: Yeah, exactly.

CS: What kind of advice do you have for writers when you're teaching and you see some talent and they're sort of starting out? What's your biggest piece of advice you give to writers?

JN: Well, I don't know whether it's the best piece of advice, but I encourage writers not to be limited to one genre. If someone wants to write novels, they should also try to write plays and poetry and essays, letters. Because when you go to the library and check out the work of major authors, you always find that they've written in all kinds of genres. So, for example, I was amazed to see that Tennessee Williams wrote beautiful short stories. We know him as a playwright. But then, well look at Chekhov, in Russia he is mostly known as a playwright, but abroad he is now known more as a short story writer, and he's an idol for many American short story writers. And Thomas Hardy was first a poet, then a fiction writer. Same applies to Denis Johnson, Sandra Cisneros. And so I think it's very healthy to take an idea, or if you have a theme, and see what you can do with it from different angles and genres. Maybe as a true story, then as a piece of fiction, a short story, a novel, maybe a prose poem. There are all these options. And so I think just to write well in one, you kind of need to write in many different modes. So, that's one advice I have. I like to relay the advice that Anne Lamott gives, namely, to just get that first shitty draft out. To lower the bar of expectations. It's okay for the first book to suck, because if one has high standards, very likely one will be paralyzed. But it's okay to write some bad pages as well, just to keep writing and develop the momentum, to develop the skill and the athleticism of writing. You can always tell a good runner or athlete; they move gracefully and that comes from doing it almost every day. So the body is ready for jumps and sprints. And I think writing is like that too. If one writes a lot almost every day, then when a good idea comes, then you can use it. The story moves in a graceful rhythm, sentences are effortless,

which comes from a lot of writing, just like the grace of the runner with lots of steps. And so my advice is it's not necessary always to have a great idea, but it's necessary to write a lot. Because when you do have a great idea, you'll be able to make something out of it. But if you're not in shape, so to speak, when you have a great idea, then the sentences will come out clunky and awkward, and maybe the story won't take off. So that's my advice, that it has to be a writer's life, not just one story and then a big pause.

Catherine Segurson is the founder of the nonprofit literary journal *Catamaran* based in Santa Cruz. She has served as *Catamaran's* publisher and editor-in-chief for 11 years and has published 43 quarterly editions of the magazine. She is also the founder of the annual poetry book prize *Catamaran Poetry Prize for West Coast Poets*, for which she has served as the book publisher for six collections of poetry over the past 6 years of the prize. She is also the founder and conference manager for the *Catamaran Writing Conference* in Pebble Beach, now in its 11th year. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Her writing has been published in *Coastal Living Magazine*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *phren-z*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Taj Mahal Review*, and elsewhere.