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The Stories for Children by Selena Dukić: *The Big and the Little Ones*

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The paper provides a bio-bibliography of Selena Dukić (1909–1935), one of the most talented and versatile yet neglected writers and publicists in Serbian and Yugoslav culture, with a focus on the fiction she wrote as a child and/or for children. From an early age, while still in the lower grades of elementary school, Dukić published in a newspaper a handful of poems that suggested her future literary experiments in the most diverse genres and traditions. Later, according to her wishes, ten of her stories for children were published posthumously in 1937 in *Veliki i mali* [The Big and the Little Ones]. All aspects of the book – starting from the atypical design and editorial conception, through the (transmedia) ways of directing reception, the correlation of the (auto)biographical, journalistic, and fictional, all the way to its complex models of authorship – deserve careful interpretation and analysis, which are offered in this paper for the very first time (in the English language).

Keywords: authorship for children, (auto)biography and fiction, children's authorship, literature for adults and/or children, Selena Dukić, *Veliki i mali* [The Big and the Little Ones]

This paper represents the first-ever attempt to briefly introduce the character and work of Selena Dukić (1909–1935) to the reading public in English, outside the Serbian-speaking area. The study of her work, i.e., the interpretation of her extremely valuable and idiosyncratic but unjustifiably marginalised literary oeuvre, is at its very beginnings, even within the borders of Serbia (cf. Simić 2024a). The current paper is therefore an appeal for scholarly research, an invitation to further consider the epoch-making contribution of Selena Dukić to the history of (Serbian and Yugoslav) literature, but with a focus on the fiction that she wrote as a child and/or for children, especially

the book *Veliki i mali* [The Big Ones and the Little Ones] (1937). The most basic insights regarding this issue are presented, which can serve as a starting point for further, more elaborate (comparative) analyses, interpretations, and reconstructions of Selena Dukić's oeuvre.

It is reasonable to assume that even the name of Selena Dukić is unknown to many readers of the present paper. Accordingly, it is even more important and expedient to start in a conventional, perhaps too schoolish manner, and to present, first of all, both as concisely and as comprehensively as possible, biographical and bibliographic data concerning this woman author.

We are talking about a writer, literary critic, (professional) journalist, and publicist who was most active in the public of interwar Yugoslavia during the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the period immediately before, during, and after the 6 January Dictatorship of King Alexander, when this state was reconstituted (and renamed) from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kingdom of SCS) to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was an era of intense and accelerated turmoil in the political, periodical, and intellectual fields of the Kingdom – fields that were otherwise deeply gender polarised, including the “literary field”, encompassing editors, authors, and publishers (cf. Simić 2022a; 2024b). It was a time of increasing censorship, autocratic but also oppositional discourses and initiatives, avant-garde and revolutionary leftist movements, epochal student rebellions, and mass demonstrations (cf. Mitrović 2023). Simultaneously, it was a period of turbulent changes and growing conflicts within the “feminist counter-publics” in interwar Yugoslavia (cf. Barać 2015), partially caused by the clear threat of Nazism/fascism, and of debate about the optimal political engagement/positioning of women who did not have the full status of citizens (the right to vote) at the time.¹

All these tendencies left their mark on both the oeuvre and reception of Selena Dukić. For instance, it is often stated that in her writing Dukić pleaded for the improvement of women's social position, considering that they were perceived as second-class citizens (cf. Tomić 2021). However, this aspect of her public engagement is still unexplored, and it is yet to be reliably reconstructed. She also covered the topics of social and class inequalities, both in her publicist work and in her fiction, leaning, among other influences, on the leftist, socialist, and communist ideas of her time (cf. Đorđević 2018). Partly due to these factors, the work of Selena Dukić has remained in the shadow of her contemporaries – until today.

¹ The political history of the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia has so far been mainly studied as the history of the “national question” (including different, often conflicting, conceptions of Yugoslavism), “ethnic competition”, and daily political, party, and parliamentary dynamics and conflicts (see, for example, Bakić 2004; Djokic 2007; Petranović 1988). This focus, however, left aside the (parallel) genesis of the so-called Woman Question, i.e. the history of the women's emancipation movement, feminist ideas, and agendas. This historiographical lacuna has been filled by some female researchers in the field of history of the 19th and 20th centuries (see, for example, Božinović 1996; Grubački 2024; Kecman 1978; Ograjšek Gorenjak 2014; Petrović 2019; Stefanović 2000). As all of them have shown, the diversity of the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia, which implied numerous socioeconomic, military-political and cultural (linguistic, confessional and other) specificities, was partially reflected in the perception not only of the “national” but also the “Woman Question”.

Selena Dukić was born in Rača, a village near Kragujevac in Serbia in 1909, just before the Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913) and WW1. The fact that the Wikipedia page dedicated to Selena Dukić is very concise and incomplete, with conflicting and sometimes incorrect information about her life, speaks, among other things, of how unexplored her bio-bibliography is even today, i.e. that its careful reconstruction is yet to be provided.² In addition, the name Selena Dukić is encountered very rarely, almost exclusively in biographical dictionaries, lexicons, and other publications of a similar, encyclopaedic kind, where the emphasis is usually on her journalistic and not literary career.³ Unfortunately, it could be said that her name is still the subject of tabloid treatment, too, since, in the early 1930s, Selena Dukić was in an intimate relationship with Milan Bogdanović (1892–1964), who was seventeen years her senior, highly influential, and initially married (he left his wife and children to start cohabitation with Selena Dukić). Bogdanović has been consensually considered the central literary critic of the interwar period in Serbian literature, and his visibility, influence, and authority crossed the borders of Belgrade and Serbia, spreading throughout (interwar) Yugoslavia. He also had a highly successful academic and cultural career after WW2.⁴ In this respect, another reason emerges for the unjustified silence or a dose of *taboo* that surrounds the character, life, work, and even the very name of Selena Dukić. It is high time for this silence and taboo to be broken, partly in accordance with the author's own will, expressed, for instance, in the article "Dan i noć na Golniku" [Day and Night on Golnik] (Dukić 1935). There, Selena Dukić, incidentally, laconically, and poignantly, notes: "It is just in the sanatorium that it becomes clear to you how bothersome are all those who know nothing else but to cry out of love and fear for you" (reprinted in Dukić 2022: 215).

Nevertheless, what is known for sure is that Selena Dukić's father was a military man, which is why Selena's family moved from Rača to Belgrade shortly after her birth. Her father was killed in the Great War when Selena was five or six years old, and only a few years later her mother, who was chronically suffering from tuberculosis, also passed away. Selena Dukić inherited this disease from her mother, suffered from it from early childhood, and she too died of it at the age of 26, in 1935, in a Slovenian sanatorium for lung diseases in Golnik (cf. Janković 2022; Tomić 2021).

² For instance, even her year of birth is wrongly stated – it is 1909, not 1910. Cf. *Wikipedia*.

³ For exceptions, see also the works by Ana Stjelja (2020) and Žarka Svirčev (2018; 2021) (cf. Simić 2022b; 2024a).

⁴ For example, for Miroslav Krleža, Milan Bogdanović, with whom he launched and edited the magazine *Danas* [Today] in 1934, before Selena Dukić's death, was "a very interesting person and a master of words. He knew how to charm verbally so that the reader did not even notice how sometimes he did not get to the point, how he was on the periphery of the problem he was talking about" (as quoted in Š[ic]el 2024: np). The magazine *Danas* had a significant role in the context of the "Conflict of the Literary Left" from 1928 to 1952 (Lasić 1970) in Yugoslavia (cf. Mitrović 2023). Selena Dukić belonged to the artistic and intellectual circles of the socialist movement through her journalistic and literary activities, as well as through her friendship and intimate ties. Selena Dukić was not involved in the activities connected with *Danas* or similar periodicals. However, she was inclined towards the leftist movements and tendencies in a specific (gender-conscious) way, which I will briefly touch upon later. All translations into English in this paper are mine.

In her childhood, Selena Dukić lived with her grandmother, sister, and brother in Belgrade, where she was educated in elementary school and then at the State Trade Academy. From as early as fifteen, or even earlier, she started working to support herself and help her family members at the same time. Due to very difficult life circumstances, Selena Dukić was deprived of higher education, even though she was an exceptionally bright, promising, and dedicated pupil/student (cf. Đorđević 2018), which makes her (literary) legacy even more impressive. Moreover, she continuously experienced child labour firsthand, which significantly influenced her literary work. This is one of the topics – the theme of child labour – which she would eventually cover in various ways in her literature written both for children and for adult readers.

Selena Dukić first found a job as a journalist in the editorial office of the daily newspaper *Vreme* [Time] in 1927; a couple of years later, in 1932, she moved to the editorial office of the daily newspaper *Politika* [Politics]. It was the most widely circulated daily of that period. The owners and editorial staff of these newspapers – *Vreme* and *Politika* – insisted, curiously, for commercial and political reasons, on both the inclusion of women in their circles of collaborators and on designing and publishing specialised women's sections/columns. In that period, starting from 1925, the editorial staff of *Politika* included, among others, a few women who would later be Selena Dukić's colleagues, and who are considered, alongside her, to be among the first-ever professional journalists within the borders of today's Serbia – that is, women who were given proper salaries and who supported themselves entirely from work in the field of journalism. These were Radmila Bunuševac Dedinac (1911–2005), who was also the editor of the culture column in the newspaper *Politika* after WW2, Andja Bunuševac (1900–1980), and Nadežda Doroški (1915–1998).⁵

Apparently, her colleagues considered Selena Dukić to be an exceptionally gifted, hard-working, and skilled journalist, and they wrote obituaries and other contributions following her death, reminding readers of her significance (cf. Janković 2022; Tomić 2021). Dukić's own journalistic articles from this period, however, as already indicated, still need to be studied more meticulously. Among them, the feuilleton based on the

⁵ "That the Woman Question was among the important topics is also evidenced by the establishment of 'women's pages' in the most widely circulated newspapers of that time, *Politika* and *Vreme*. *Vreme*, which was founded in 1921, very soon after the first issue, launched the 'Women's Movement' column, where issues in the field of women's engagement were covered. After that, the weekly section 'Women's World' was established, followed by 'Home Life' and 'For You, Ladies'. *Politika* regularly published its columns 'Women's World' and 'Women's Conversations', and these small changes in the concept of *Politika* represented a big step in the change of generally accepted social values. This orientation of daily newspapers was motivated both by the general interest in 'women's issues' that became a constant topic of the interwar public sphere and for economic reasons. By establishing columns intended for women, the newspaper expanded its readership, and thus the number of customers, which had a favourable effect on circulation" (Milinković 2015: 37). In 1941, the Association of Journalists of Serbia had a total of 264 members, 12 of whom were women; Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak (2020) noticed a similar statistical disproportion when it comes to Croatian and Slovenian journalists in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia. For a study of the interwar Yugoslav periodical press with regard to editorial politics and the Woman Question, i.e. the portraits of its women editors, see Simić (2024b).

biographies of so-called women worthies, i.e. portraits of her women predecessors, stands out (Dukić 2022; cf. Barać 2015). In these same years of her short but fruitful career, Selena Dukić also regularly published literary reviews. Her reviews were especially praised, for example, by the Dadaist Dragan Aleksić (cf. Tomić 2021). Besides, from 1925 to 1934, she also continuously published her own literary contributions in various interwar magazines, journals, and newspapers, including *Letopis Matice srpske* [Annals of Matica Srpska], *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Herald], *Vreme, Žena i svet* [Woman and the World], *Reč i slika* [Word and Image], *Misao* [Thought], *Politika*, etc.

However, it was not the first time that Selena Dukić's fiction was published. While she was at primary school, the teacher and activist in the field of pedagogy, Novka Kovačević,⁶ noticed her talent, and on this teacher's initiative, Selena's poems were printed in *Beogradske novine* [Belgrade Newspaper], the only periodical published in Belgrade during the occupation of Serbia by Austria-Hungary (1915–1918). These poems were found by the philologist Bojan Đorđević and then reprinted and briefly researched in one of his scholarly papers (2018). He concluded that in *Beogradske novine*, a newspaper printed by the Military Governor-General in occupied Serbia from 1915 to 1918,⁷ the first published verses of the later well-known Serbian writer and journalist – Selena Dukić – appeared. As Đorđević points out (2018: 16):

This Serbian writer who died prematurely was only eight years old when one of the most versatile collaborators in *Beogradske novine*, the poet Milorad Petrović Seljančica, persuaded the editor Milan Ogrizović to print a handful of poems of this girl. In addition, Seljančica also published a short article about Selena Dukić, which is the first ever critical article about this writer!

In his own article, Milorad Petrović Seljančica notes (as quoted in Đorđević 2018: 16):

This is Selena Dukić, a third-grade pupil at Palilula Elementary School. She has a book of her own, *Poetry* – in which she writes her verses. This nine-year-old child amazes everyone with her clarity. She has been writing verses for a long time, she has read a lot and continues to read. Now she is reading the works of Ljuba Nenadović. She knows almost all children's literature. She does not hide that she writes poems, and she talks about it freely, openly, and judiciously.

⁶ Novka Kovačević (years of birth and death unknown) was a feminist herself, and she was among the founders of the Društvo za prosvetovanje žene i zaštitu njenih prava / Ženski pokret [Society for the Enlightenment of Women and the Protection of Their Rights / Women's Movement] immediately after WW1 in Belgrade (Lebl Albala 2005: 268–269).

⁷ The Imperial and Royal Military General Governorship in Serbia was a military administration established by the Austro-Hungarian army during the occupation of the Kingdom of Serbia in WWI. The governorship operated from 1 January 1916 to 1 November 1918. Along with the Bulgarian occupation of Serbia, it was one of two separate occupation zones created after the invasion and partition of the Kingdom of Serbia by the Central Powers. The Austro-Hungarian zone included the northwestern part of Serbia, with Belgrade as the administrative centre. The Military General Governorate in Serbia was directly subordinated to the High Command of the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Thus, it can be said that Selena Dukić first entered the public sphere as a child who was already an author, a poet, and a passionate reader in the lower grades of primary school, and even then she amazed her older contemporaries with her reading experience, seriousness, and confidence. Much later, in various aspects of Selena Dukić's modest reception, her "premature maturity", the aura of a prodigy, would still stand out and resonate – with full reason. As Bojan Đorđević claims (2018: 17):

Although a girl, Selena Dukić saw all the misery with a maturity uncharacteristic of her age, intensified by the hardships of war and occupation, and in her naive childish way, she expressed her rebellion because of it, allowing us to locate the future publicist with distinctly social and left-wing tendencies.

Đorđević concludes that "what is most interesting in these verses is their pronounced social note" (ibid.). In other words, as already mentioned, although she did not take part in the official leftist movements or in the Communist Party, Selena Dukić was, partly following her intimate and friendship circles, inclined towards socialist and communist ideas. Yet, in contrast with her male contemporaries, she articulated these tendencies in a specific, gender-conscious, and female-centred way.⁸ It should also be stressed that these same tendencies would gain special significance not only in Dukić's future publicist engagement but in her short stories as well – more precisely, in her quantitatively modest but qualitatively valuable corpus of fiction in general, which, despite its undoubted value and epochal features, has not until today been the subject of close research/reading (cf. Simić 2022b; Simić 2024a). Among other things, that Dickensian "social note" will also be reflected in strictly understood children's stories, of which there are ten in total and which Selena wrote and published in *Politika*, where she was employed as a journalist, in the very last years of her life (at around the age of 25). Before her death, at the end of 1935, in a testamentary letter to her employer at the time, Živko Milićević,⁹ she herself marked these short stories as "intended for children", asking him politely to publish them in their entirety, which he then fulfilled (Dukić 2022: 221–222).

Nevertheless, there is something else alongside the "pronounced social note" that can be found even in her earliest poems and then again in her later works. It is the specific, idiosyncratic creative rhythm of Selena Dukić, her undoubted musicality and individual talent, marked by a strong inclination towards lyricism, which is recognisable in her later literary texts – mostly short stories – intended for both adolescent and adult audiences. As already indicated, she wrote and published those stories for almost a decade, starting from 1925 (when she was sixteen years old) until 1934. In her aforementioned authorial

⁸ Perhaps the most striking evidence of this is her non-fictional, journalistic article "Jedan moj lep susret" (My Beautiful Encounter), in which the author recounts an encounter with a young, unpretentious woman worker of a communist orientation, in whom she sees an ideal of femininity worth fighting for. Therefore, the leftist aspect of Selena Dukić's work cannot be discussed separately from the female/feminine/feminist aspects (cf. Simić 2024a).

⁹ Živko Milićević (1896–1975) was a respected editor in interwar Yugoslavia, as well as in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia established after WW2. He left behind a dozen books. In addition, he wrote poems, theatre chronicles, travelogues, romantic memories, and literary reviews.

testament addressed to Živko Milićević, she delineated a corpus of her various short stories, making a clear distinction between those written for children and the rest of the stories (of course, it is implied that those were the ones **not** written for children). Thus, even though she did not return to writing poetry after her childhood (see: Đordjević 2018), i.e. although she turned primarily to prose genres – including one or two plays, a handful of short stories, short stories for children (sometimes in sequels), novel-like biographies, feuilletons, and other nonfiction genres (Dukić 2022) – Selena Dukić always tended towards the lyrical and lyricism. The musical principles of text organisation and her inclination to sound and rhythm as the constitutive principles of prose remain noticeable in all phases of Dukić's creativity and authorship, shaping and adding complexity to the astonishing stylistic-semantic, thematic, and genre range of her entire oeuvre. All this is well illustrated in the opening of the short story "There Goes a Boy Whistling", initially published in *Vreme* on 6 January 1931 (Dukić 2022: 71):

To nije san, pa ipak liči na san. Ide jedna mala kreatura, svih udova zapalih u tuđe rukave i tuđe nogavice, da bi se teže mogli otud izvući nego rakovo meso iz ljuštire na tanjiru. Ide i zviždi. Jednu raskovanu i rasklimatanu melodiju koju, ako pokušate da prevedete na muziku odraslih ljudi, videćete da je puna ljubavnih motiva. Ovako je komična, svaki joj ton pomeren sa svoga mesta; oni zajedno sapliču kompoziciju, praveći u nevidljivom i od nje isto tako nakaradnu i u tuđe obučenu figuru.

[It is not a dream, yet it feels like a dream. There goes a small creature, with all of his limbs caught in other people's sleeves and other people's trouser legs, so that it would be more difficult to get them out of there than crab meat from the shell onto a plate. There he goes whistling. A loose and disjoint melody that, if you try to translate it into the music of grown-ups, you will see it is full of love motifs. This way it is comical, every tone of it is out of place; together they trip up the composition, creating in the invisible and out of it an equally queer figure dressed in someone else's clothing.]

Here, the narrator explicitly addresses the translation of a child's melody to the music of grown-ups. This statement/description could be freely understood as an (auto) poetic principle of Selena Dukić's entire oeuvre. In other words, it is about the gaps and ambivalence that emerge between the perspective of a child and that of an adult, about different, yet inseparable, codes of children's, childlike, and adult (sensory, cognitive, emotional) perceptions, and about the possibilities of their mixing, merging, and mutual translating (cf. Simić 2024a).

Fortunately, this and other prose contributions – all short stories, along with an important part of Selena Dukić's journalist corpus and her testamentary letter to Milićević – which until recently were scattered in various interwar magazines and newspapers, as well as in archives, and which were difficult to access even for researchers of periodicals, were collected recently by Tatjana Janković and compiled in the book *Preda* [Yarn] (2022), published by the "Vuk Karadžić" National Library in Kragujevac.

Preda is the first and so far only edition of Dukić's texts in the form of a book if we exclude the collection of stories for children named *Veliki i mali*, published two years after the author's death, in 1937, by the influential Belgrade-based publishing house

Geca Kon, and thanks to the already-mentioned initiative of the author herself and that of her employer, Živko Milićević. The collection of Selena Dukić's stories for children was published as part of the *Zlatna knjiga* [Golden Book] publication series, which was edited from 1931 to 1940 by the renowned theatre expert, author, and critic Živojin Bata Vukadinović (1902–1949), with illustrations by the equally prominent interwar designer, draftsman, and caricaturist Vladimir Žedrinski (1899–1974), who also drew a caricature of Selena Dukić herself. It is a particularly atypical edition.

On the one hand, at that time, in the capital city of Yugoslavia, Belgrade – above all through the famous publication series *Plava ptica* [Blue Bird] and *Zlatna knjiga* – children's literature was taken seriously, carefully translated, and intensively published. Among the factors that certainly contributed to this was the interest of local writers in (writing) children's literature, then the distinct development of avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia, inseparable from the strong communist and/or socialist orientation, the fondness for infantilism inherent in those movements (cf. Marković 2020), and, finally, the fact that the surrealists themselves, whom Dukić was close to, published their fiction in the newspaper *Politika za decu* [Politics for Children]. It is not surprising, then, that Selena Dukić's testamentary will was complied with promptly, but only when related to fiction intended for children.¹⁰

On the other hand, the book is unusual insofar as it consists of two complementary parts. First, there is a sequence of ten short stories written by Selena Dukić. They are marked by the already-mentioned tendencies: the “pronounced social note” that Đorđević emphasises when it comes to Dukić's early poetry, a strong journalistic, feuilleton-like tendency, as well as the author's Dickensian engagement and spirit of rebellion. All are mainly designed in the conventional, already established manner of the time, including a typical anecdotal core with plot twists and/or lessons. In this regard, they are sometimes close to the genre of fable (“Pošao bik na oranje” [The Bull Went Ploughing]; “Priča o dobrom mačku Marinku” [The Story of the Good Cat Marinko]). The stories are mostly written from an omniscient perspective, one sensitive to social injustice, class distinction, and (prematurely) growing up (in the capital of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Besides, they contain a subtle didactic impulse, and some of them can also be read in an Enlightenment tradition, which applies to Dukić's journalistic articles as well. For instance, in the story “Šta se to desilo o sv. Nikoli” [What Happened on St. Nicholas' Day], a boy from a rather wealthy family gives his family's celebratory cake to a poor peer from the same school instead of taking it to church and fulfilling the appropriate ceremony. Initially, the reader is informed that such a choice was met with disapproval from adults and the parents of other children in school. However, the end

¹⁰ It is particularly poignant that in the testamentary letter to Živko Milićević, Selena Dukić expresses the hope before her death that her friends will help Milićević in collecting and publishing her oeuvre as a whole, which sadly never happened. Dukić primarily identified herself as an author of fiction, not as a publicist, journalist, or literary critic. Today, it is a great challenge to mitigate, even partially, the consequences of the long delay in the reception of Selena Dukić as a writer, one who deserves to be considered alongside Crnjanski or Krleža. It is unclear why her contemporaries, who were aware of her talent, remained silent about her literary work. I will soon address this question.

is optimistic, since the parents of the boy protagonist respect his kind gesture at the end of the day.

When it comes to Selena Dukić's short stories for children, the realist motivation is strongly favoured over the fantastic one, as shown in the story "Pustolov na sankama" [A Sled Adventurer], where the central topic – the collective sled adventure of a group of boys – is ultimately depicted as a dream. In addition, this story and some others – similar to Dukić's early poetry – dwell on reminiscences of WW1 and the period of Occupation, as a recent locus of collective trauma. Selena Dukić consciously plays with a child's naive perspective to point out that until recently, children's playgrounds were the scene of war battles. The short story "Siniša u odbrani Beograda" [Siniša in Defence of Belgrade] also stands out as representative in this respect, insofar as the author repeatedly plays with the naive child's perspective, building tension between it and the perspective of adults. Here, and a feature of Dukić's other stories for children, as well as the novelistic tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries in general, the plot is based on a misunderstanding (between a child and adults), i.e., on the ignorance of the child protagonist. Initially, listening to the confusing speech and conversations of adults, the boy concludes that there will be a military, armed attack in Belgrade. Determined to defend his city, the boy goes out alone onto the street where a military exercise, i.e., an air raid drill, is actually underway. Until the very end of the story, he does not realise that he has found himself in an imitation of a state of war. As in many of Dukić's stories for children, the comic effect is achieved by careful narration that rests on the mismatch between the reader's and the protagonist's perspectives.

The beginning of the mentioned story is offered here, to demonstrate the narrative strategies of Selena Dukić (1937a: 57–58):

Siniša Katić u svome kratkom životu nije zapamtio nijedan rat. Ali kažu da je sedam godina pre njegovog rođenja bio jedan tako strašan rat da će se to još stotinama godina pamtitи i pominjati.

Ustvari, Siniša, koji je mislio i tvrdio da sve zna, nije umeo ni da zamisli to što se zove ratom. Kad je jedared pokušao da nacrtava boj, izgledalo je kao da je jedna kutija šibica skočila preko druge kutije, a o svaku je bila obešena jedna crta koja je imala da izigrava pušku.

Pa ipak je Siniša bio ratoboran: bio je jači od svojih vršnjaka a voleo je da začikuje čak i starije od sebe. Kad bi od jačeg dobio udarac, junački bi otrpeo, sačuvao tajnu za sebe. Otac ga je često opominjao da je ružno tući se s drugovima.

– Eh, rekao bi sin, kako si ti išao u rat! To je još gore...

– To je zaista gore, ali u rat se ne ide iz zadovoljstva.

– Ja baš jedva čekam da porastem pa da idem u rat...

– Više puta sam ti govorio da je rat ružna i teška stvar, da se ljudi u ratu ubijaju. Ti si to izgleda zaboravio.

– Dobro, rekao bi Siniša, jer malo bi ga bilo žao oca, ja ti obećavam da neću nikoga ubiti kad pođem u rat.

– Ništa nemoj da obećavaš, nego je bolje da na takvu zabavu ne misliš i da se nikakvom ratu ne raduješ, jer on donosi samo zlo i nesreće.

[Siniša Katić could not remember any war in his short life. But they say that seven years before he was born there was such a terrible war that it would be remembered and mentioned for hundreds of years.

In fact, Siniša, who thought and claimed he knew everything, could not even imagine what something called war might be. When on one occasion he tried to draw a battle, it looked as if one matchbox had jumped over another, and on each one a line was hung that was meant to represent a gun.

And yet Siniša was a fighter: he was stronger than his peers and liked to taunt even those older than him. If he received a blow from someone stronger, he would bear it heroically and keep it to himself. His father often warned him that it was ugly to fight with his friends.

“Eh,” the boy would say, “you went to war! That’s even worse...”

“It’s really worse, but you don’t go to war for pleasure.”

“I can’t wait to grow up and go to war...”

“I have told you more than once that war is an ugly and difficult thing, and that people are killed in war. You seem to have forgotten that.”

“All right,” Siniša would say, because he would feel sorry for his father. “I promise you that I won’t kill anyone when I go to war.”

“Don’t promise anything, it is better not to think of such things as fun and not to look forward to any war, because it only brings evil and misfortune.”]

However, in the book *Veliki i mali*, ten of Selena Dukić’s stories are followed by an equally extensive “Šareni deo” [A Colourful Part], filled with various texts, riddles, and anecdotes for children. Interestingly, they are preceded by an unsigned note (see: Anonymous author 1937), probably written and included by the editor of the publication *Veliki i mali* himself, Živojin Bata Vukadinović.

It is a compelling, concise article that has the hybrid form of a hidden obituary of Selena Dukić, but an obituary adapted for the age of children as readers, as well as a critical-interpretive judgment of lived experience as a prerequisite of and pledge for the value of Dukić’s fiction. Perhaps, partly, due to the fulfilment of a testamentary will that is not highlighted here, i.e., which remains implicit, this editorial intervention directs the reception of the book very determinedly. The author of the unsigned text undoubtedly expects the audience to read *Veliki i mali* through an (auto)biographical prism.¹¹ He or she explains that Selena Dukić’s writings for children are essentially a consequence of her thwarted, difficult, and poor childhood. Young readers are simultaneously informed that the author is dead and that the edition was published posthumously, as a sign of respect, gratitude, and admiration for Dukić’s hardships and sacrifices, with a hint of hope that it remains her pledge for the future. At the same time, the author of this anonymously published article insists on apparent social injustices and class differences in (the capital of) Yugoslavia – which are otherwise among Selena Dukić’s obsessive topics (Anon. 1937: 73–75; emphasis added):

These stories were written for you, children, by Selena Dukić. But you cannot thank her in person for these stories. She has passed away.

¹¹ In this regard, one can think of the correlation with Maxim Gorky’s *Детство* [Childhood].

Selena Dukić loved children and knew very well how children live. She knew it so well because *her own childhood was similar to that of so many children about whom she wrote with great love*.

She grew up without her parents, because they died early, and *she lived in long courtyards with one-room and kitchen apartments, of which there are many in Belgrade, and they are inhabited by people unable to afford expensive rents*.

Selena Dukić had to earn her own money from an early age. [...] She did many different kinds of jobs.

She was always young and always beautiful. Death made her never grow old.

If Selena Dukić were alive today, you, children, would surely have grown to love her a lot. But since she is no longer here, you are left to love what she wrote for you – her stories.

Dukić's short stories for children, unlike those intended for adult readers, and thanks to the fact that they were collected and published promptly in the form of a book, have been the subject of analysis on a few occasions. However, so far they have not been considered in conjunction with the rest of Selena Dukić's production, which significantly narrows, even thwarts, the proper reception of each of these two segments of her fiction individually and of her legacy as a whole. Her stories for children can be considered the least hermeneutically stimulating and least inventive part of her literary-publicist oeuvre. Nevertheless, without this comprehensive insight, and only after the posthumous edition of *Veliki i mali*, critics pointed out that "we have lost a great literary talent too soon" (Crnilović 1937: 324) and that "it is a real pity that all the possibilities of this prematurely deceased woman writer were not noticed in time" (Cucić 1937: 111). It turned out, especially after the release of *Pređa*, that those possibilities were significantly greater than even Selena Dukić's contemporaries and colleagues believed or noticed. Her oeuvre abounds in anticipatory qualities, and it is stimulating for various types of research (cf. Simić 2024a). The discovery of Selena Dukić as a writer drastically reshapes the landscape of (Serbian) literature. Future careful analyses of her oeuvre could reveal not only the tendencies of modernism and the avant-garde but also their sovereign transcendence, not only surrealism and expressionism, but also their confrontation with the realist epistemological framework and the traditions of the Enlightenment, that is, a radical and profound transformation, not only Marxist and leftist impulses, but also their intense feminisation. This recognition likewise requires us to approach the legacy of the protagonists of the (organised) avant-garde from new perspectives. Only such a dialectic would allow Selena Dukić's oeuvre to be adequately situated, and it is an understatement to say that it would open interesting new chapters of literary history.

Selena Dukić was close to the avant-garde movements and authors from the beginning of the 1930s, above all the surrealists and Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981), one of the greatest Croatian writers, whose literature significantly inspired her. Her talent was (most probably) recognised by authors such as Marko Ristić, Dušan Matić, the aforementioned Dadaist Dragan Aleksić, Miloš Crnjanski, Milan Bogdanović, the women editors of the communist and feminist magazine *Žena danas* [Woman Today], and others (cf. Janković 2022; Tomić 2021). Nevertheless, as far as is known, apart from

the mentioned women editors¹² and Dragan Aleksić, no one left a public comment regarding her literary talent or oeuvre. In 1942, Krleža recorded in his diary: "That girl was gifted, and we all underestimated her" (as quoted in Tomić 2021: 108), which highlights that during her lifetime, probably, in part, due to intimate circumstances, Selena Dukić remained an essentially unread author, although she was among the few women who had close contacts with the key (male) authors of those times. Besides this and the unfavourable contextual factors, as already mentioned, another reason for her marginalisation could be that her testamentary will was not fully complied with, i.e., that only her stories intended for children were published in the form of a book before 2022.

This situation overshadowed the very best aspects of Selena Dukić's oeuvre: the experimental fictional prose forms written between 1925 and 1934. In her short stories intended for adult readers, one can easily discern a sovereign knowledge of the key novelistic traditions and conventions of the 19th and early 20th centuries (such as realism and naturalism). However, these stories also engage in an inventive, independent, spontaneous reaction to the main currents of modernism and the avant-garde, above all surrealism and expressionism, transgressing those currents at the same time. Since she was not an official member of surrealist or other literary movements, Selena Dukić was not guided by elaborate poetic programmes or manifestos; she did not base her poetics on strictly described, differentiated, or polemical positions; nor did she insist on the authorial self-reflexivity otherwise characteristic of avant-garde artists. Nevertheless, as an experienced reader, poet, and prose writer since childhood, she followed her own creative impulse, and, in her work, she progressively reached a high degree of distinct poeticisation of prose and linguistic luddism, challenging syntactic, formal, genre, as well as social (bourgeois and/or patriarchal) conventions (cf. Simić 2024a). So far, I am not aware of any other Serbian (woman) author who, in the entire interwar period, achieved this to the extent that Selena Dukić did in such a small space. At the same time, this dynamic is inseparable from the specific dialectic of, conditionally speaking, and in William Blake's terms, innocence and experience, i.e., childhood and adulthood.

In the words of Bojan Marković, a researcher of children's avant-garde literature in Serbia who primarily focuses on poetry and not prose (2020: 2):

The influence of the avant-garde poetic heritage was decisive for the development of children's poetry in the 20th century. The reasons for this can be primarily sought in the aspiration of the avant-garde, above all, surrealist poetic text, to penetrate the truth of the world through the category of infantilism and appropriate the silly, Dadaist, non-standard language of a self-absorbed child. Therefore, any text that inherits the heritage of surrealism/avant-garde, and this includes not only those attributed to children's poetry but also those primarily written for the adult "implicit reader", is, in a theoretical and poetic sense, potentially immanent in children's understanding of language and play.

¹² More precisely, they reprinted part of her travelogue (non-fiction) in their magazine; see Dukić 1937b. Ksenija Atanasićević wrote an obituary in which she highlighted the journalistic aspect of Selena's work; Atanasićević 1937.

It is interesting, however, that in her short stories intended for children, Selena Dukić mostly stays away from these tendencies. Addressing children from an omniscient and more conventional narrative perspective, in this part of the corpus, the author comes closer to journalistic customs and styles, staying within the limits of recognisable realistic motivation and everyday use of language. In other words, in the short stories for children, she was not inclined towards modernist and avant-garde artistic practices, which in turn dominate the segment of the opus that is not intended for children but for the “implicit adult reader”. In that segment, although the ten short stories of Selena Dukić differ significantly in register, theme, and style, which is partly a consequence of her maturing from a child to a girl to a woman – a process that can be tracked and analysed over time – the figure of a rebellious child (whether a child-worker or a daughter in a bourgeois and patriarchal culture) is inscribed much more subtly and decisively into the narrative flow and into the author’s voice, often permeated with confessional impulses typical of poetry, or dramatic elements that subtly dictate the rhythm of the narrative (see: Simić 2024a). It is interesting that towards the end of her life, Dukić also painted self-portraits, which additionally explains the strong pictoriality of her literary texts.

An analysis of this creative process, as well as the comprehensive dialectics of child and adult authorship by Selena Dukić for children and/or adults, deserves and demands more extensive scholarly work and a more studious approach, to which I am dedicated and which is yet to come. Among other things, it would be invaluable to situate Selena Dukić’s work in the context of the Serbian, Yugoslav, and world literature of her time, the social-realist children’s literature of the time, surrealist children’s texts (especially in the Serbian and Yugoslav context), both on the level of themes and motifs and stylistically. On this occasion, my goal has been to depict her biography and bibliography in a short, basic outline, to introduce readers outside Serbia to the legacy of Selena Dukić, focusing primarily on the book *Veliki i mali*.

Selena Dukić started her authorial path as a child, publishing poetry in which she pointed to social injustice and the traumatic experience of WW1 in a strikingly mature and suggestive way from a rebellious child’s perspective. In the years that followed, she had the experience of child labour, which would significantly mark her further fiction and publicist work. As a teenager and young woman, she wrote and published a dozen short stories intended for an adult audience, where her focus on infantilism and the child’s perspective fruitfully intersected with modernist and avant-garde poetic principles and tendencies. This part of the corpus represents her most valuable, yet still under-researched, literary heritage. In the very last years of her life, Selena Dukić also turned to storytelling for children, where she stuck to safer practices and already-established narrative conventions and poetic tendencies. In these stories, so to speak, she attempted to talk to children through the voice of an adult. By contrast, in her stories intended for adult readers, she often tried to validate the voice of a child. In any case, she remained dedicated to translating a child’s melody into the music of grown-ups, and vice versa. This interplay is only one of the reasons we can see her today as a sort of unique avant-garde (literary) *enfant terrible*.

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Priče za djecu Selene Dukić: *Veliki i mali*

U radu se donosi osvrt na biografiju i bibliografiju Selene Dukić (Rača, Srbija, 1909. – Golnik, Slovenija, 1935.), jedne od talentiranih i svestranijih, ali i najzapostavljenijih književnica i publicistica u srpskoj i jugoslavenskoj kulturi, s naglaskom na književnost koju je ona pisala kao dijete, odnosno onu koju je pisala za djecu. Dukić je već kao učenica nižih razreda osnovne škole objavljivala pojedine pjesme u periodici, u kojima se sugestivno navješćuju kasniji literarni eksperimenti u različitim žanrovima, tradicijama i stilovima. Poslije, prema oporučnoj želji, godine 1937., u izdanju „Gece Kona“ (Beograd), objavljeno je deset njezinih pripovijedaka za djecu, prikupljenih iz periodike i objedinjenih u knjizi *Veliki i mali*. Svi aspekti knjige, od netipična dizajna i uredničke koncepcije, (transmedijalnih) načina usmjeravanja recepcije, preko auto/biografskoga, publicističkoga i fikcionalnoga suodnosa, pa sve do složenih pitanja dijalektike dječje književnosti, književnosti za odrasle, i modela (dječjega i odrasloga) autorstva, zavrjeđuju pomno tumačenje i analizu. Ovaj rad predstavlja prvi dosad poznat pokušaj takva tumačenja i analize na engleskom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: auto/biografsko i fikcionalno, autorstvo djela za djecu, dječje autorstvo, književnost za odrasle i/ili djecu, Selena Dukić (1909. – 1935.), *Veliki i mali*