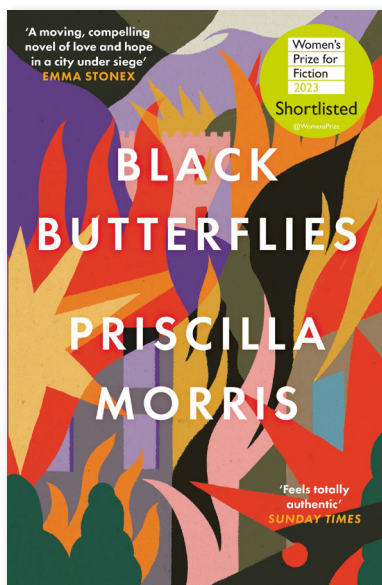


Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

BLACK BUTTERFLIES BY PRISCILLA MORRIS



PLOT SUMMARY

Sarajevo, Spring 1992. Each night, nationalist gangs erect barricades, splitting the diverse city into ethnic enclaves; each morning, the weary residents – whether Muslim, Croat or Serb – push the makeshift barriers aside. Threat hangs heavy in the air.

Zora, an artist and teacher, is focused on the day-to-day: her family, her students, her studio in the old town. But when violence finally spills over, she sees that she must send her husband and her elderly mother to safety with her daughter in England. Reluctant to believe that hostilities will last longer than a handful of weeks, she stays behind. As the city falls under siege and everything they love is laid to waste, black ashes floating over the rooftops, Zora and her friends are forced to rebuild themselves, over and over. There is a breathtaking story of disintegration, resilience and hope.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Black Butterflies*, Morris weaves a story of the power of art in shaping human resilience. Zora, an artist and teacher, is obsessed with painting bridges and has made her name in the art world with her paintings of them.

As the siege of Sarajevo develops, Zora tunes out the rising conflict by concentrating on her painting. Her students find her passion inspiring and her painting an act of resistance. The students, on their part, are committed to turning up to class even when they are so hungry that they have to lie down from exhaustion on arrival. Art, and the resistance it represents, is that important.

Even after she has run out of paint and the shelves in the shops are bare, Zora makes

her own multimedia “fire paintings” using whatever she can find to make marks – “pigeon feather, spent bullets, shattered glass” (p171). When painting with her neighbour’s little girl, Una, they experiment with grinding rubble from the broken walls into powder and make a coloured paste with old food colouring. The need to create surpasses the need for proper materials.

Books also become a refuge in Sarajevo, especially Mirsad’s bookshop. As well as staying open well past the time most businesses have been forced to close, Mirsad’s shop – which turns into more of a library when he starts lending out the books – becomes a haven for those who have been in hiding, those who are hungry and anyone who craves human contact. As well as being a place where people can connect to stories and culture, the shop becomes a hub for UN relief food packages. Later in the siege, when Zora and Mirsad become lovers, Mirsad reads to her and the others from old folk tales, providing distraction in the very darkest of times.

DISCUSSION POINTS

When the Vijećnica burns, Mirsad tells Zora that: “They say almost two million documents burnt in there. First editions, rare manuscripts, land records, newspaper archives. Our national heritage destroyed in a night.” (p148)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Priscilla Morris is the daughter of a Yugoslav mother and a Cornish father. She grew up in London, spending summers in Sarajevo, and studied at Cambridge University and the University of East Anglia, where she gained her PhD in Creative Writing. She teaches Creative Writing at University College Dublin and lives in County Monaghan, Ireland. *Black Butterflies* is her first book.



‘A beautifully written book set against the backdrop of the siege of Sarajevo; it’s about love and loss, and where your home truly is.’

Tulip Siddiq, 2023 Judge

In war and conflict, cultural artefacts, books and documentation are lost or destroyed for a number of reasons, often purposefully. You will no doubt be able to think of many other examples of books being burnt, monuments defaced, and cultural treasures lost forever. Morris really brings home the tragic loss of Sarajevo’s cultural history in the burning of the Vijećnica, using the motif of the blackened pieces of paper – *Black Butterflies* – as her title for the work, and thus foregrounding the event as a key moment in the siege. The horror of the burning of the Vijećnica represents the terrifying ease with which centuries of history can be destroyed in one evening.

However, is there a difference between the “official” history of a country and the lived history of its inhabitants, particularly

women? There is so much in Zora’s life and in the lives of the other women in the book that will be forever undocumented – the daily tasks, devotions and caring duties that don’t result in art or literature, but yet enable its creation. Do we tend to focus on the creation of art – particularly when it comes to the works of Great Men – and forget what has happened in the background to allow it to happen?

How important are books, paintings, sculptures and other artworks, and how tragic is it when they are destroyed in war? How does that destruction compare to the loss of human life and the other horrors Zora later realises have happened during the war in Sarajevo?

QUESTIONS

How does Morris use the symbol of the bridge to represent the once-glorious diversity of Sarajevo?

On p.1, Zora describes her day-to-day work and caring activities, which are representative of the responsibilities of many middle-aged women. With her mother and husband in England, does Zora find any positives in her new-found independence?

How does the dinner party scene (pp 39-45) illustrate the different political views in Sarajevo at the time of the siege?

Can you understand why Samir may have finally decided to join the fighting after resisting it for so long?

NEXT STEPS

Inspired by Zora, draw or paint some local bridges and see what the experience makes you think about. Meditate on the nature of bridges and the way that they connect opposing sides as you draw and paint. Do you find it a calming activity? You could experiment with different styles, detail, broad strokes, angles and perspectives.

You might also write a story using the title “Burning Bridges”. Rather than thinking about how bridges connect opposing sides, think about what this phrase inspires in your mind. You could think about a situation where someone “burns bridges” in a relationship or at work – maybe it’s a story about throwing caution to the wind, ending a toxic relationship, or doing something you later regret.



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

A moving drama set against the backdrop of the crisis that rocked the Balkans in the 1990s, *Rose of Sarajevo* by Ayşe Kulin reveals the tremendous lengths people will go to in the name of love. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak tells the story of the Turkish-Cypriot conflict in Cyprus, and of lovers caught on either side of the divide.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES PRISCILLA MORRIS

BARBARA KINGSOLVER DEMON COPPERHEAD

JACQUELINE CROOKS FIRE RUSH

POA LALINE PAULL

MAGGIE O'FARRELL THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?