

## Transcript Interview writer-in-residence Katarina Mitrović

*Dit is een podcast van De Nieuwe Oost Wintertuin.*

*In deze podcast interviewt schrijver en radiomaker Nikki Dekker de Servische schrijver Katarina Mitrović. Katarina is de eerste gast in het nieuwe internationale writer-in-residence programma van Wintertuin. In november 2021 heeft Katarina gedurende haar residentie in Nijmegen een maand lang geschreven, de stad verkend en samengewerkt aan een Nederlandse vertaling van haar poëtische novelle Niet alle huizen hebben een tuin. Nikki en Katarina praten over haar schrijverschap, over Servië, en Katarina draagt voor uit eigen werk. Het gesprek met Katarina wordt gevoerd in het Engels.*

**Nikki Dekker:** Hello Katarina.

**Katarina Mitrović:** Hello Nikki.

**Nikki:** Really nice to meet you here, in the Besiendershuis. You've been here for a residency in Nijmegen.

**Katarina:** Yes, for a month.

**Nikki:** For a month, in this house.

**Katarina:** Alone in this big house [laughs].

**Nikki:** For the people listening, can you try and paint a picture of where you've been staying?

**Katarina:** It's a really big and really old house. It is really nice, but there are a lot of sounds. Everyone comes to me and says: there's a ghost in that house. So that wasn't a good thing to hear when I came here but I don't know, I'm used to it. And I think I'm like, ghost-friendly, so it was really OK. But it is really nice and inspiring and it looks onto the river Waal. So yes, it was really a nice place to write.

**Nikki:** It's a good view.

**Katarina:** It is, yeah.

**Nikki:** Right now it's a bit grim, because it's very gray and raining.

**Katarina:** Most of the days were like that, but that's okay. And also there's a lot of tourists, so they come and take pictures.

**Nikki:** And you can watch them, with their selfiesticks.

**Katarina [laughs]:** Yes.

**Nikki:** And what have you've been working on? Because you are a writer, you've published poetry, you've published a novel in poetry form, you do scriptwriting...

**Katarina:** Right now I'm writing a new novel. And it's going to be like a 'normal' novel, not in rhyme.

**Nikki:** And what is a normal novel?

**Katarina:** Like a prose. But also while I was here, I was doing some screenplay, because that is actually my job, I'm writing screenplays for tv shows and now I'm doing some movie.

**Nikki:** Some movie?

**Katarina:** Yes.

**Nikki:** What kind of movie?

**Katarina:** Actually right now I'm doing two movies. One of them is based on my book, the last book I've published (Not all the houses have a yard). Jan, the director, from Belgrade, because – I think we didn't say that, I'm from Serbia, I live in Belgrade - she came to me and asked me if I want to work with her, because she wants to direct a movie based on my book. So right now I'm writing a screenplay, but it is going to be a lot different because, of course, it is a movie.

**Nikki:** We should also get into that, but first, paint more of a picture for the listeners of what the book is. Because why is it so difficult to make a film out of a book, well, it's a poetry book or at least, what I understood of it, because I only got to read a fragment. The fragment I read starts with just a tiny bit of prose, of a therapist basically describing a young woman sitting in front of her, and then we delve into this prose poem from the point of view of the woman going into therapy. Why did you land on this form, of doing a poem in a novel?

**Katarina:** Actually, I'm not sure, because I didn't plan that. I just started to write something. Because mostly I think that this book is about fear, especially fear of death. I did have some of the same fears, and I just started to write and I actually started to write a poem, but then, in one moment I was like: okay, this is too big to be a poem.

**Nikki:** The poem just didn't end...

**Katarina:** Yes. And in one moment I realized that I have characters, that I have a story, and that it is actually a novel, but it is just in rhyme. So it actually did happen accidentally.

**Nikki:** This makes it sound like it went really naturally and easily. Was that the process as well, or did you struggle with it?

**Katarina:** I did struggle writing this. I spent maybe like two years writing this? I did struggle, but I also enjoyed...

**Nikki:** What did you struggle with, did you struggle with the form especially, or?

**Katarina:** Not only the form. I have some emotional struggles. Because it's a story about a girl in her early twenties, and her father died from cancer. And then she started to go to therapy and she is facing her own fears. So it was really emotional, you know, it is not easy to write about those things. So maybe that was like the biggest problem. But in the end, it really helped me.

**Nikki:** So did you have to face your own fears as well, writing it? What kind of fears?

**Katarina:** A lot of fears. I had, or I have, still a lot of fears. I'm claustrophobic. Really a lot of fears. And I was trying to face them while I was writing. To help me, while I'm helping my character.

**Nikki:** Yeah, exactly. There's a lot of people who say writing is therapeutic, but then there's also 'professional authors' who say: your writing shouldn't be therapeutic, it should be for the public, otherwise you have a diary. But I presume you don't agree with that statement...

**Katarina:** I mean, I'm not like a robot. When I'm writing a tv show, that is different, because that is my job. And there are a lot of other people there: directors, producers, other writers. It's a really different thing. But when I'm writing poetry, or something that I'm really writing alone, and I have more freedom, it is different. Because in that moment I am writing about things that bother me. So it is different, and sometimes it is like some kind of therapy.

**Nikki:** You've made up the therapist as well, in the novel. So you are kind of the therapist as well.

**Katarina:** I did go to therapists, when I was younger. So I use all of that e[X]perience, while I was writing this book.

**Nikki:** I think it's a useful experience going into therapy, not only for delving into yourself, but also just the weird setting of sitting in front a person who is constantly writing things down when you're quiet and you're thinking: what's she doing, what is she writing about?

**Katarina:** Yes, it is really strange because you have some man or woman who is sitting in front of you and you're talking to them about a lot of things that like maybe no one knows, and you don't know anything about them, usually, or very little. It is really strange.

**Nikki:** Do you ever have the spiral of asking your therapist when they go 'how are you doing' and you're like: I'm good, how are you, what's going on in your life?

**Katarina [laughs]:** Yes, every time.

**Nikki:** Allright. Let's get to the book. Would you maybe want to read the beginning in Serbian for us? And then I will ask Merle to read the translation in Dutch for our Dutch listeners.

**Katarina:** Okay, I will. So that is the beginning of the book. The chapter is called 'Staklene Oči'.

## STAKLENE OČI

Milica. Dvadeset tri godine. Živi sa cimerkom u iznajmljenom stanu. Ignoriše pitanja koja se tiču oca, brata i majku pominje nevoljno i svedeno. Radi u dečijoj igraonici, iako bi radije bila pisac. Na pitanje šta misli o slabim ljudima, odgovara da joj se gade. Na pitanje da li je jaka, klima odrično. Ruke joj drhte, izgleda kao da je neko naterao da dođe. Ali nije. Misli da nešto nije u redu sa njom. Oseća to čitav život. Realnost joj je naporna, teško podnosi što svaki dan mora da se kupa, jede i oblači. Ljudi je umaraju, umornija je kada je sama. Plaše je nagli zvukovi, letenje avionom, trenutak pre nego što zaspi, klovnovi, nasilni gubitak svesti, paraliza sna, vodena para koja pravi demonske oblike i napadi anksioznosti koji tek treba da se dese. Tvrdi da kontroliše dešavanja u svojim snovima. Muči je što ne može da se probudi kada želi. To je čini klaustrofobičnom, zatvorenom u svoj um. I tada se ubija. Svaku noć na drugi način. Ne zna da živi u sadašnjem trenutku. Ima nekoliko verzija budućnosti u kojima provodi vreme. Kada se uplaši nisu dobre, bolje su ako je pijana. Napominje da je psihoterapija skupa. Inače bi došla ranije.

Izvlačim konac koji visi iz pantalona  
uvijam ga oko prsta i stežem  
ona postavlja nepovezana pitanja  
sa skrivenim značenjem  
ona – žena koja postaje moj psihijatar  
zapiše nešto svaki put kad zastanem  
umišljam kako crta moju karikaturu  
na zidu iza nje vise portreti  
možda su to bivši pacijenti  
možda i mene želi okačenu  
među tim zloradim licima koja se keze  
dok se pravi da radi svoj usrani posao  
preplanula zato što je upravo  
došla sa mora  
verovatno dobro zarađuje  
to govore njene cipele  
od našeg razgovora  
koji se pretvara u masu  
istumbanih pitanja  
i mojih mutavih odgovora  
kupiće novu maskaru  
i to neku skupu

**Nikki:** Wow. Well, it sounded wonderful.

**Katarina [laughs]:** Okay, thank you.

**Nikki:** And I could hear a few words, like ‘psychiater’ and ‘patiënt’. So Merle, would you want to read the Dutch translation for us please?

**Merle:**

GLAZEN OGEN

Milica. Leeftijd: drieëndertig jaar. Woont met een huisgenote in een gehuurd appartement. Ze negeert de vragen over haar vader en praat met tegenzin en zeer summier over haar broer en haar moeder. Ze werkt op een peuterspeelzaal, maar was liever schrijfster geworden. Op de vraag wat ze van zwakke mensen vindt, antwoordt ze: walgelijk. Op de vraag of zij sterk is, schudt ze van nee. Haar handen beven, het is alsof iemand haar gedwongen heeft hierheen te komen. Maar dat is niet zo. Ze denkt dat er iets met haar aan de hand is. Dat gevoel heeft ze haar

hele leven al. Ze vindt de realiteit vermoeiend en brengt het nauwelijks op zich elke dag te wassen en aan te kleden, en te ontbijten. Ze wordt van mensen doodmoe, maar vindt het nog vermoeiender om alleen te zijn. Ze schrikt van onverwachte geluiden, heeft vliegangst, is bang voor het moment dat ze in slaap valt, heeft een fobie voor clowns, is bang dat ze zomaar haar bewustzijn kan verliezen en dat ze zich in haar slaap niet kan bewegen, ze schrikt van dampwolkjes die demonische vormen aannemen en is bang dat ze ineens een paniekaanval krijgt. Ze beweert dat ze haar dromen zelf kan sturen. Ze vindt het vreselijk dat ze niet wakker kan worden als ze dat wil. Daar wordt ze claustrofobisch van en dan sluit ze zichzelf in haar eigen geest op. En pleegt ze zelfmoord. Elke nacht op een andere manier. Ze beseft niet dat ze in het heden leeft. Ze heeft van de toekomst een aantal verschillende varianten waarin ze haar tijd doorbrengt. Als ze bang is, zijn ze niet zo goed, als ze dronken is, zijn ze iets beter. Ze zegt dat psychotherapie duur is. Anders was ze eerder gekomen.

Ik haal een loshangend draadje uit mijn broek  
wikkel het om een vinger en trek het aan  
ze stelt onsamenhangende vragen  
met een verborgen bedoeling  
zij – de vrouw bij wie ik in therapie ga  
maakt zodra ik even niets zeg een aantekening  
ik zie voor me hoe ze een karikatuur van me  
tekent  
aan de muur achter haar hangen portretten  
misschien van vroegere patiënten  
misschien wil ze mij daar ook zien hangen  
tussen de gemene gezichten die grijnzend  
toekijken  
hoe ze doet alsof ze met haar stomme werk bezig  
is  
ze is bruin omdat ze net terug is  
van een vakantie aan zee  
ze verdient waarschijnlijk goed  
dat vertellen haar schoenen  
en van ons gesprek  
dat overgaat in een opeenvolging  
van stompzinnige vragen  
en de antwoorden die ik daarop mompel

kan ze nieuwe mascara kopen  
vast hele dure

**Nikki:** So this novel was your debut novel.

**Katarina:** Yes. I wrote two books of poetry before that.

**Nikki:** And this book was already quite a big success if I understand correctly.

**Katarina:** Well, 'quite a bit', I don't know...

**Nikki:** It's horrible to place this question to you, of course. But it was nominated and I think it won a prize?

**Katarina:** I didn't win a prize but for a prize that is called Biljana Jovanović (it is like a prize in honor of one of the most important female Serbian writers) I almost won, I was like in the last circle. Maybe it was like in the top three books.

**Nikki:** That's brilliant, that's really good. And what is the meaning of this prize in Serbia? Because for example here in the Netherlands, for the last few years female authors, especially young female authors, have become more and more successful in finally catching up to the gender divide...

**Katarina:** Yes, in Serbia too. In the past few years there's a lot of female writers who are really good and finally have a place. But it is still difficult I think...

**Nikki:** What is difficult?

**Katarina:** Because there is some other award that is maybe like the biggest award, and for that award I was in some circle...

**Nikki:** What do you mean in some circle, like nominated?

**Katarina:** Yes, like nominated. And there was a problem because there were a lot of male authors who were nominated, and only a few women. I can't remember now exactly, but really a few women and a lot of men.

**Nikki:** A very classical divide.

**Katarina:** Yes. Because of that, there was a group of girls who, like a joke, made their own award for female authors who didn't get nominated for that prize.

**Nikki:** Oh, excellent.

**Katarina:** Yes, it was really nice. I was nominated for that award too and it was really... There wasn't a winner, only nominations.

**Nikki:** And was there a party and a gala and everything?

**Katarina:** It wasn't, because of the Covid.

**Nikki:** Right, I keep forgetting about the stupid Covid.

**Katarina:** I know, I always forget we're living in this dystopian time. But it was nice. But there are a lot of female writers now who are really good, and I'm really happy because of that.

**Nikki:** And is there a sense of community with that? Do you feel yourself to be part of a group of upcoming women or is it more like these things are all happening in like different tracks?

**Katarina:** Somehow both? I don't feel a part of that group of women. Not only in Serbia, but also in the Balkan, or other countries. But we're not a 'group' or something, I think we're are just like female writers who just write in a same moment of time. And we're supporting each other, because there are so many more male writers, so we just need to find our place.

**Nikki:** And how do you do that? How do you support it?

**Katarina:** That is the example of girls who make their own award, because if you don't want to give any female writers awards, we are going to give them ourselves.

**Nikki:** Yeah, exactly.

**Katarina:** Because it's not actually about awards, you know.

**Nikki:** No, it's about recognition.

**Katarina:** Yes.

**Nikki:** So what is Serbian literature like? I'm not sure I've ever read anything from Serbia. First, how would you describe literature in Serbia (of course very short and stereotypical because we don't have three hours and you can't do a PhD)?

**Katarina:** I'm not sure. Right now I think that there is something like a new wave, because there are a lot of young poets and they are reading their poems in bars. It is a part of the alternative scene. And also you have the 'commercial' books, that bring money.

**Nikki:** What do you mean with the commercial book?

**Katarina:** Books that are selling well, but they're not good, actually.

**Nikki:** Allright. Like a romance novel, or a thriller.



**Katarina:** Yes, romance novels and thrillers. Maybe that is the situation now, but I think there is a strong alternative scene. And about the whole Serbian literature: I think there are a lot of really good authors from Serbia. Also there is Ivo Andrić, he got the Nobel Prize for Literature? So I think really that there are a lot of good Serbian writers who need to be translated. A lot of them are not alive anymore, but I think they are really good. But the situation is like that. I know that there aren't any Serbian writers who are translated to Dutch?

**Nikki:** The Nobel Prize winner probably, but I'll have to look into that. But I do feel like there's... We are in Europa, the Netherlands and Serbia, but there is very little going on in terms of exchange. Do you consider yourself a Serbian author, or a European author?

**Katarina:** I consider myself an author. I am from Serbia, and Serbia is in Europe so [laughs]. But I don't know, I'm just a writer, and a woman, and a human.

**Nikki:** Of course, and it would be silly to put it in a way that you would represent a country, but for me...

**Katarina:** You are somehow doing that, because you are from that country. People listen to this, they have some picture?

**Nikki:** But speaking about the necessity of translations from Serbian authors into Dutch, I think that I and a lot of Dutch people consider ourselves to be very international and maybe more European than Dutch. But often the European part, it ends in Poland, it's just western Europe that we are really connected with. And I think that's such a shame, and I would really want to change that and know more about it. But I was wondering how do you experience that? Do you maybe feel more connected to other Balkan countries, is there any sort of European literature from other countries that you like to read or that you really connect with?

**Katarina:** Like me or like people from Serbia?

**Nikki:** No, just you personally.

**Katarina:** I'm thinking about writers who I like and where they're from, but I really don't know. I don't really look where they are from, I know that that is important because it is usually somehow a part of their work. Because if you're like from South America, you're usually writing about some character who is living there, so you meet their culture and other things because of that. But I don't really have like... I don't know. I for example like Michel Houellebecq from France, but is also like Zakhar Prilepin, he's from Russia. Right now I'm reading Roberto Bolaño, so...

**Nikki:** So all over the place. And would you also consider them your examples? Do you have examples? Writers that you think: I would like to do that. Like guiding lights.

**Katarina:** No. I don't think so. But of course, I have a lot of writers that I admire and that I really like. But I'm always trying to find my own road. So I'm not sure about that. But there's

a lot of people... For example, when I was younger, I had some writers I really liked, but after that I'm just trying to find something that is mine.

**Nikki:** So speaking about taking your own way... You are also a scriptwriter. Which I think is a whole different way of writing, no?

**Katarina:** It is, it really is.

**Nikki:** I tried it once. And at least then, it was very structured. And people kept asking me: what does this character want, what is this scene leading to?

**Katarina:** Yes, I understand. But I went to school for that. I went to the faculty of dramatic arts. And I was learning to write screenplays and plays for theatre. But I never did that. Maybe sometime in the future but right now I'm not into that. Just film. When I was applying for the school, I only wanted to work in theatre.

**Nikki:** Oh, interesting.

**Katarina:** Yeah. And I wasn't into the movies or tv shows.

**Nikki:** So what changed?

**Katarina:** I don't know, while I was there, we were writing both screenplays and plays. And I just found myself in movies and in tv shows and right now, I really don't want to be doing something in theatre, maybe in the future, but now I don't. It is different because you have structure. You have... I mean, when you're making your own movie, like author movies, it's different, you have much more freedom. It can be like a poem, you can do anything when you're doing a movie. But tv shows are different. Because tv stations need to broadcast that. And they need people to watch that. There is a lot of money around that. So it is really just a job.

**Nikki:** And if you were now going to make a film out of the novel, which is really a long poem... How the fuck are you going to do that?

**Katarina:** Well, I make some changes in the story. And I make it to be for the movie. I mean, it is the same character, but some things are a little different.

**Nikki:** If people are going to watch the film, are they still going to be able to see that it was a prose poem? Are you trying to build a sense of poetry into the film at all?

**Katarina:** I'm feeling too [X] to do that. Right now, there is a normal dialogue. But I was talking to the director, because we want to have those poems in the movie but we're still not sure how we are going to do that. We're still working on that.

**Nikki:** Do you have ideas already that you want to share?

**Katarina:** I have some ideas but I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about that. But we'll see.

**Nikki:** So you're still in the thick of things?

**Katarina:** Yes.

**Nikki:** And I imagine you've been working on it, as you said, in this residency as well, in this house. And you are leaving soon, this podcast was supposed to be of course a big reading and interview during a festival, but of course there is a pandemic, so this podcast is the end of your residency. What have you accomplished during the residency?

**Katarina:** I don't know. I think now I'm feeling more peaceful than I was when I came here. And also I quit smoking.

**Nikki:** Are those two linked, you think?

**Katarina:** Yes. Also, it was strange, because I thought that if I quit smoking that I wouldn't be able to write. That was really connected. I was like okay, I can quit smoking because that is good for me, but I'm just not going to be a writer anymore. I thought I couldn't write without cigarettes. I know, that is just an addiction.

**Nikki:** No I get it. Was it the ritual?

**Katarina:** It was, like coffee and the cigarettes, and then I sit and light the cigarette, and take a little coffee and thinking and start to write... And now I just sit and I'm like: okay what now.

**Nikki:** So you've made a new ritual?

**Katarina:** I started to drink tea, but it is not the same.

**Nikki:** No, it's not the same.

**Katarina:** I like tea but it's not the same. So I will see. But it was strange because I was like okay, I'm afraid to write without cigarettes.

**Nikki:** Really? What was the fear about?

**Katarina:** I was afraid because somehow when you're smoking cigarettes while you're writing you feel like there is someone with me. There is something that is supporting me while I'm writing. And in that moment, without cigarettes, I felt really alone. I need to be alone when I'm writing but sometimes it is really hard to be alone.

**Nikki:** This reminds me also of a fragment of the English translation of your book. Where the girl goes to, I think her father's grave, and she says: I finally don't give a cigarette to you anymore, because I realize you don't have a mouth, or something like that...

**Katarina:** Yes, a mouth to smoke with, because he's dead. It is because there is a ritual in Serbia, when you light a cigarette and you just put it on the ground, like on the grave, it's for those who are dead.

**Nikki:** Oh, that's beautiful.

**Katarina:** Yes, but I was like: okay, but actually, I think that somewhere, upstairs, you don't need to smoke anymore because you [X].

**Nikki:** Of course, of course. But it is in multiple cultures right, like putting out food, putting out drinks for the dead. But you put the cigarette like an incense stick, no? You light it and you put it in the ground and it just burns up?

**Katarina:** Yes.

**Nikki:** Ah, that's beautiful, I like it. So now that you are leaving Nijmegen, your final question. Did Nijmegen impact your writing at all, or did you see something here or learn something?

**Katarina:** Yes, of course. Everything changes. Every day we are going through some change. And I think that when I'm changing, my writing is changing. So yes, probably. But I'll see when I came back how different I am from what I was.

**Nikki:** Thank you very much.

**Katarina:** Thank you.

**Nikki:** You are leaving, if listeners want to follow you, or your work, can they do that somewhere?

**Katarina:** On Instagram?

**Nikki:** Okay, what's your Instagram?

**Katarina:** @katarina.mitrovic\_

**Nikki:** Excellent.

*Dankjewel voor het luisteren naar het interview met writer-in-residence Katarina Mitrović. Ook dank aan Roel Schuyt, die een prachtige Nederlandse vertaling maakte van Katarina's novelle en Merle Findhammer, die de vertaling zojuist voorlas. Servische literaire organisatie Krokodil, die in samenwerking met Wintertuin Katarina als writer-in-residence cureerde voor ons, en het Besienderhuis, in het bijzonder Jan-Wieger van den Berg, die deze residentie mogelijk maakte. Wie volgend jaar onze writer-in-residence wordt, zal nog even op zich laten*

wachten. Ga voor de meeste actuele informatie naar onze website [wintertuinfestival.nl](http://wintertuinfestival.nl) en houd onze socials in de gaten.

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Wil je weten welke schrijvers je in de gaten moet houden? Luister dan naar Radio Debuut. In deze reeks worden kersverse debutanten geïnterviewd over hun debuten, debuten in onzekere tijden en het belang van literatuur. Selm Wenselaers gaat in gesprek met debutanten als Maxime Garcia Diaz, Lisa Weeda, Roos Vlogman, Helena Hoogenkamp en Yentl van Stokkum. De debutanten op hun beurt gaan in gesprek met elkaar. Radio Debuut is een podcast van De Nieuwe Oost Wintertuin en is nu te vinden in je podcastapp.