



A powerful semi-autobiographical novel set against tumult in the Balkans captures war's random violation of children's lives, writes **Natasha Cica**

'MY friends moved, and I didn't want to be the last person left in Leipzig," says the softly spoken Sasa Stanisic, explaining why he now lives in Berlin. Maybe that's the kind of answer you should expect from someone knocked sideways at a formative age by a civil war. Dramatically displaced, to be more exact, as Stanisic was at 14 from his home town Visegrad in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, by the bloody ethnic conflict of the 1990s.

The son of a Serb father and Muslim mother, Stanisic and his family fled to Germany when Serb forces invaded in 1992. Now 30 years old, and with a solid track record of German-language writing including short stories, radio plays and essays under his belt, Stanisic is attracting new readers, with the translation into English of his award-winning debut novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*.

There are basic similarities between the lives of Stanisic and his book's young protagonist, Aleksandar. For a start they share the same name. At a time when even names — Christian, Muslim? — suddenly become nationalist labels, Aleksandar is (as Sasa was) a young boy of mixed ethnic background whose magical childhood of plums and *borek*, fishing and football is ripped

apart by harsh realities. A decade on, the adult Aleksandar tries to come to terms with his Bosnian past. So exactly how autobiographical is this work? "Much less than you would think from reading my biography, and comparing it to the life of Aleksandar who spends time in the war and comes to Germany as a refugee," says Stanisic. "All those big steps are kind of parallel. When you go into details, I changed very much. At the beginning it was kind of a diary, a belated diary of my own life. I didn't want to publish it. It was just for me and my family.

"When you have the feeling that your whole life has been interrupted, that you have no power to steer around in this life, when something happens as radical as a war that changes your life completely, you want to understand more about that," he continues. "Not political things, not social things, just your own private little world. So I went around and asked questions, and wrote down the answers. That's where I went away from my own story, put in tales from other people, and many invented things.

"I wanted to tell a universal story of loss, of the absurdity of war, of childhood and of growing up under these radical circumstances, a story which can happen, which does happen, everywhere in the world right now.

"But my life?" Stanisic pauses. "I was very lucky, I didn't experience as much trauma as



Aleksandar did in the war.” Aleksandar’s trauma is as a child witness to the rapidly escalating madness of mass rape, torture and murder. Bodies get pitched into the River Drina like so many discarded, gutted fish. A little Muslim girl with bright, beautiful hair, called Asija, who could plausibly be Aleksandar’s sister, may or may not have disappeared forever, and likely haunts him for as long as that. Aleksandar’s uncle Miki turns out to be a war criminal.

These are not exactly topics for recreational reading, even for those with an interest. Stanisic’s skill as a communicator should not be underestimated, especially as a writer with a Serbian name (yes, names are still important).

The young Aleksandar’s naive-seeming narrative voice serves as a seductive decoy for Stanisic’s sophisticated eye for humane — and inhumane — detail, which always maintains a fine balance between regarding the pain of others and sharing it. “It’s a very delicate issue,” concedes Stanisic. “How far can fiction go to describe the biggest horrors of our times, genocide, the killing of the innocent? And how to do it when you as a writer were not a witness?”

“What I did in this novel is play with open cards, and be as honest a narrator as I could be. Which meant staying in the distance and letting others speak. I talked to people in Visegrad and closely followed The Hague’s war crimes tribunal in order to be able to use the correct places of the crimes. But then I don’t show them, I just point to them. This is certainly partly out of respect for the victims and their families, but also because my novel is not about genocide, not about war in its most cruel moments. I personally think the work here has to be done by historians, by journalists, by truth-seekers in a common way. I only tried to add a personal component to it, a more intimate insight into being unable to speak when something as horrible as this happens.

“This distant, somehow estranged way to see and tell what happens I found to be the most direct way to create a reality around the war crimes. First through the eyes of the child and then later by giving voices to the witnesses: both to criminals and to victims.”

Fans of Emir Kusturica’s 1995 cult film *Underground*, which also dips into the darkness of this Bosnian war, will recognise another device at work in *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*: a rollicking style of humour that can head over the top fast. Stanisic likes that film, but otherwise is no real fan of Kusturica’s work, which he thinks perpetuates “narrow and narrow-minded” stereotypes about the Balkans.

“Every time somebody meets me and I tell them I’m from the former Yugoslavia, it’s: ‘Oh,

your parties, and your schnapps, and you are aggressive people, but always joyful!’” he explains. “And I’m like: ‘No we’re not. I had a boring family, we didn’t keep geese, and we didn’t ride on sheep through the city. We’re Europeans, like you guys.’”

But Stanisic doesn’t throw out his cultural baby with that bathwater. “Culture is the smells of your country, your food, your dancing, music. I would never cry to a German song; I would cry to a Bosnian song, but never to a German song. My pragmatic homeland is Germany, because the language in which I earn my money, and in which I communicate most of the time, is German. I have an apartment there. Yet at the same time I have this beautiful childhood, memories of how it was back then, how beautiful this country is and how good people can be there.”

Stanisic’s second novel, a work in progress, is set in World War II but in Switzerland, not the Balkans. It’s a love story about a man and a woman who meet and connect, then lose each other because a letter never arrives, and spend the next 40 years living with that loss.

“Then slowly, year after year, they come again closer to each other a little bit, and that’s the circle I’m trying to make.” It’s a classical love story, agrees Stanisic, but there are bound to be darker twists. His new hero is a refugee from Germany, and his heroine works for an organisation that helps people cross borders.

Does this mean *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* marks the end of Stanisic’s Bosnian road, professionally speaking? Not at all. Before that book, “there was a huge, vast space in my mind about things that I didn’t know about Bosnia. I always came back as a visitor, a researcher, a tourist, but never lived there after the war, never stayed for a long time. So there are so many things I don’t know, so many stories still to be found out”.

“After such a long time on that book I had to take a break. Of course I will go back but it won’t be a war story. I might go back to the Tito years, to the 1960s and ’70s. That’s what interests me about my former country,” he concludes, “Not only Bosnia, but the former Yugoslavia.”

Sasa Stanisic’s novel How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (\$32.99). He will be a guest at next week’s Perth Writers Festival.

Natasha Cica is director of Hobart-based consultancy Periwinkle Projects. She is writing a book about Lithuanian-Tasmanian wilderness photographer Olegas Truchanas.



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Bearing witness: Author Sasa Stanisic aims to
show war through the eyes of children