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Booklover - Bridges

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Booklover — Bridges

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Bridges are powerful both as structures and symbols. They connect us, as the 37 bridges across the Seine connect the city of Paris. Bridges can also isolate us. Any of the 231 bridges that cross the Mississippi River will facilitate a journey between East and West, but they cannot take us to the world of **Mark Twain**. The river was his world, not a muddy wet obstacle to bypass.

Bridge the Gap. Build a Bridge and get over it. Cross that Bridge when I come to it. Bridging Time. Bridge over Troubled Waters. Water under the Bridge. These common sayings have become part of our everyday speech, often mean quite different things, and the opportunity for overuse is ever present. For I'm sure I will find these words coming out of my mouth sooner than later. A **Google** search on "bridge definition" further expanded this train of thought beyond where I wanted to contemplate.

Yet on a recent trip to **Blue Bicycle Books** I discovered **Ivo Andrić's** book *The Bridge on the Drina* while perusing the alphabetically organized fiction section of the store with my **Nobel Literature Laureate List** in hand. *The Bridge on the Drina* is part of what is known as the *Bosnian Trilogy* written while **Andrić** was living quietly in Belgrade during World War II. His **Nobel Prize** recognition came in 1961. Soon my thoughts on building bridges, words about bridges and this column were colliding. As I touched the edge of the binding to remove the book from the shelf my mind began to wander to the Cooper River Bridges. I was completely fascinated with the recent construction of the **Arthur Ravenel, Jr.** cable stay bridge, the longest in North America. I also watched the complicated orchestrated destruction of the two previous bridges that spanned the Cooper River that separates the peninsula of Charleston from Mount Pleasant and points North. The life of the Lowcountry has been forever changed by these bridges.

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I know that a lot of people don't agree with me, but, what the hey, what are opinions for? I saw that the **Special Libraries Association (SLA)** announced the results of its association-wide vote on a new name. Voting in record numbers, **SLA** members failed to approve a proposal to change the organization's name to the **Association for Strategic Knowledge Professionals**. 50 percent of those members eligible to vote participated in the referendum, with 2,071 voting yes and 3,225 voting no. It recalled an article in *ATG* many years ago (see v.12#6 and v.8#1) by **Lucretia McClure**, a famous medical librarian, when she defended the use of the "I" word and decried the tendency by many associations, schools, etc. to change it! Was talking to **Lucretia** the other day and she is alive and well and still of the same opinion!

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Could I relate these current events with **Andrić's** book? Maybe Yes. Maybe No. Yes in the simplistic view that a bridge was constructed to connect communities divided by a river. No because **Andrić's** book spans 400 years of complex history and was described by **William H. McNeill** in his Introduction as "one of the most perceptive, resonant, and well-wrought works of fiction written in the twentieth century...No better introduction to the study of Balkan and Ottoman history exists, nor do I know of any work of fiction that more persuasively introduces the reader to a civilization other than our own." Many newcomers entering the Lowcountry via the Cooper River Bridge may indeed feel they have dropped into a whole new civilization. Yet, in Yugoslavia, the history of the Ottoman Empire, the complexities created by the different ethnic and religious groups, and the clash of East and West in the area create a civilization that is distinct, sometime mysterious — maybe not too unlike our Lowcountry. The two sides of the Cooper River have been connected for less than 100 years. **Andrić's** village, the Višegrad, became connected through the bridge over the Drina to the two parts of the Sarajevo road in the 16th century. "For this great stone bridge, a rare structure of unique beauty, such as many richer and busier towns do not possess ("There are only two others such as his in the whole Empire," they used to say in olden times) was the one real and permanent crossing in the whole middle and upper course of the Drina and an indispensable link on the road between Bosnia and Serbia and further, beyond Serbia, with other parts of the Turkish Empire, all the way to Stambul."

Andrić provides an historical account of how the bridge was built over the mighty green waters of the Drina as a legacy for the Grand Vezir **Mehmed Pasha** of Sokolovići. Each chapter spans time toward the twentieth century with the intimacies of fictional characters and individual tales providing us a window into the flow of life, conflict, and belief along the Drina. We experience the torture, fear, and even death of the workers who toiled for five years to build the 11 bridge arches from stone, the sensations of the river's energy as first pedestrians traverse the bridge, and the assassination of the Grand Vezir just as his bridge was replacing the Drina ferry.

Almost every time period embraces a story around the kapia, a structure in the middle of the bridge that is considered to be the heart of the bridge. "So, on the kapia, between the skies, the river and the hills, generation after generation learnt not to mourn overmuch what the troubled waters had borne away. They entered there into the unconscious philosophy of the town; that life was an incomprehensible marvel, since it was incessantly wasted and spent, yet none the less it lasted and endured 'like the bridge on the Drina'." Scholars came to the kapia to rest and argue the issues of the day. Decapitated heads of Serbian intruders were displayed in warning along the kapia. Wedding processions stopped along the kapia. Dressed in her

wedding garments **Fata**, distraught with the arrangement to be wed to better her family's status, counted on this moment as she gave herself to the Drina rather than her arranged husband. Austrian soldiers marched across the bridge and a young soldier found himself bedeviled and trapped by the subtle glance of a young Turkish girl near the kapia. The town grew at the base of the bridge. Vendors, inns, taverns, brothels, "Lotte's Hotel" and their influence were wrought by the bridge on the village. The railroad introduced a new form of connection and thus "The great stone bridge which according to the ideas and the pious intentions of the Grand Vezir from Sokolovići, was meant to link the two parts of the Empire, and "for the love of God" make easier the passage from West to East and from East to West was now in fact cut off from both East and West and abandoned like a stranded ship or deserted shrine." Ultimately the bridge succumbs to relentless bombing during World War I. The description of the destruction is intimate and personal as seen through the eyes of **Alihodja** while experiencing the demise of his shop. At the end only the kapia is seen by **Alihodja** and not the seventh pier of the bridge, just the green energy of the Drina.

Finally another attempt to "bridge time" or "bridge the gap." "We will bridge greater rivers and deeper abysses. We will build new, greater and better bridges, not to link foreign centers with conquered lands but to link our own lands with the rest of the world." This somewhat prophetic and timeless quote challenges the reader to embrace the future by understanding the past. Social structure, religion, cultures and technology are just a few subjects that fall in this challenge. Even literature is not immune to the future. In the twenty-first century, digital photography, blogging and Websites are modern tools for recording an important event in history. This is illustrated in two photo Websites, <http://ravenelbridge.net/> and <http://oldcooperriverbridge.org/>, developed by **Frank Starmer** chronicling the "building and "unbuilding" of the Cooper River Bridges. Unlike **Andrić's** book which used **Nobel** worthy words of fiction to convey an understanding of a region's history based around a bridge. I accept the challenge proposed by a student espousing to his peers on the kapia, although as I write this column on my laptop with the Internet open in the background I still find myself touching the book, rereading passages and contemplating the Balkan history. I have to reflect on **Andrić's** words: "Everything appeared as an exciting new game on that ancient bridge, which shone in the moonlight of those July nights, clean, young and unalterable, strong and lovely in its perfection, stronger than all that time might bring and men imagine or do." At this point I don't believe I can build a technology bridge and just get over it — not yet. 🌿