New Student Reading
2012-2013

The Tiger’s Wife

by Téa Obreht

THE CLASS
The New Student Seminar, a required course for all new students enrolled in the Steinhardt School, will help you become familiar with the university and your program of study. The class provides an opportunity for you to explore your role as a new college student using this year’s reading theme as your guide.

THE BOOK
The Tiger’s Wife tells the story of Natalia Stefanovi, a doctor living in an unnamed country that bears similarities to the author’s homeland, the former Yugoslavia, a nation that no longer exists. Natalia journeys to a town across her country’s new border to administer vaccination and embarks on a psychic journey that merges stories, myths, dreams, and memories to create a vivid picture of a beloved and fleeting world. Stories about mysterious figures—a tiger’s wife, a deathless man—provide a tapestry for Obreht to raise questions about our relationship to history, war, and culture, and the power that elements outside our control can have in shaping our destiny.

THE THEME: ARTISTRY AND ANCESTRY
The Tiger’s Wife is about the experiences that mold our identities and bind us to our families and the places we call home. It is also about discovering new ideas and perspectives that expand our understanding of the world around us. Obreht asks us to think about conflict within families, societies, and countries, and to understand war as event and metaphor. The Tiger’s Wife is a work of fiction, and yet it has the quality of a memoir in progress, of an oral history set down for future generations to absorb and imagine.

College is a time of enormous growth and potential, a time of taking stock, of rising to challenges, and charging forth on your own independence. Just as an artist takes material at hand and fashions it into something completely different, you are composing a new life here on Washington Square. Like Natalia Stefanovi, you have set out on a journey that is influenced by history, myth, memory, and driven by your individual circumstances. Your life—that huge story in progress you are presently creating—is influenced by ancestry, but also shaped by your own artistry and choices.

THINGS TO CONSIDER
The Tiger’s Wife is a character-driven novel where the inner life and experiences of characters move the plot forward. At the center of the novel is the mystery of a young woman’s relationship to her grandfather and his stories. As readers, we can interpret the stories in many ways—as cultural memory, as metaphor, fable, parable, or daydream. How do you understand Natalia’s stories? Consider the philosophical questions the book raises: What are our ethical responsibilities toward each other? What are the limitations of violence as a response to conflict? What are the limitations of humanitarian efforts? How do we proceed when our values clash with those we are seeking to help? Can we repair what has been torn apart? How do we come to terms with death and loss?

MORE THINGS TO CONSIDER
In the New Student Seminar, you will be looking at the complex ideas that arise from your reading and will be asked to think about how your own life story might be influenced by the powerful transition you are undertaking as a new college student. The community you grew up in, your family’s values, and certain significant voices have shaped your ideas about life and what you expect from yourself. How do we understand ourselves in light of changing social contexts? How much power does our history, our family, our ways of understanding ourselves have when we relate to others in our new home on Washington Square?

Look at The Tiger’s Wife through the eyes of your discipline. Could you re-imagine it as a dissonant musical composition, a play for young audiences, a record of a global public health crisis, an interesting story of family dysfunction, a lesson plan to teach a segment on life? As you read The Tiger’s Wife, let your field within NYU Steinhardt inform your reading.

NEW STUDENT CONVOCATION
On Tuesday, October 9th, we will meet with Dean Mary Brabeck along with a faculty guest lecturer for the New Student Convocation, the culminating event in our discussion.