

BOOKS | NONFICTION

Where humanity meets the sea

Journalist shares tales of life, death and mystery in crippled corner of fishing economy

By **CECILY SAILER**
Special Contributor

The global fishing market is more lucrative than ever — 2017 yielded record profits amid a growing infusion of multinational conglomerates.

Yet the world's fish stocks hover near the point of collapse. Decades of aggressive fishing, rising ocean temperatures and the introduction of industrial "super-tracters" have so depleted marine stocks that an estimated 70 percent of fish species are fully used, overused or in crisis.

When first reminded of this reality, we're likely to think in environmental terms — the implications for ecosystems across the globe. But consider the effect on the world's 12 million artisanal fishermen, who venture daily beyond their shores in low-tech, rehabbed boats, trying to subsist on a product growing more scarce by the day.

It's here, in this crippled corner of the fishing economy, that Anna Badkhen begins her sixth work of nonfiction, *Fisherman's Blues: A West African Community at Sea*.

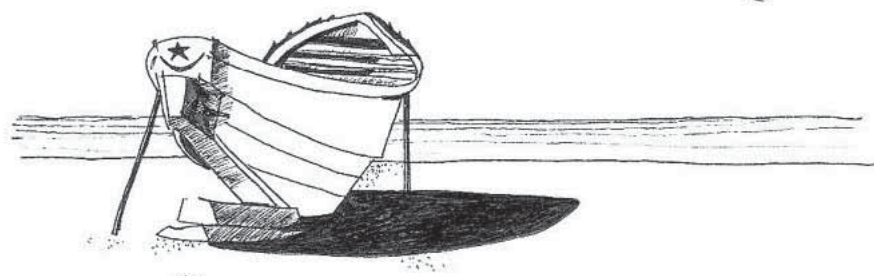
For more than a decade, Badkhen — who lives in Texas — has chronicled everyday life in struggling nations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali and Somalia. With *Fisherman's Blues*, she transports the reader to waterlogged life in Joal, Senegal, a coastal town southeast of Dakar. Having reported mostly from landlocked nations, Badkhen endeavors to understand how "the shifting demarcation line between earth and sea defines the way we see the world, shapes our community and communalities."

In service of this question, Badkhen becomes part of a populace that relies almost exclusively on the sea and its harvest. At the invitation of 37-year-old Captain Ndongo Souaré, she joins the crew of a 30-foot vessel constructed of wood planks and a single outboard motor. This team of nephews, sons, brothers and half-brothers spends its days scanning the horizon for schools of fish, dropping and hauling gill net and plucking catch from the net's unforgiving grasp.

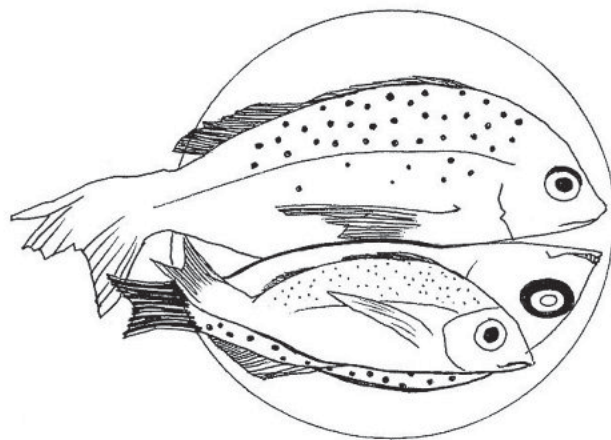
Much of their time at sea feels listless, filled with the idle show-and-tell of cellphone screens, talk of exploits in distant waters, or recollections of a time when the ocean was teeming, when "you went to the beach and picked whatever you wanted out of the sea with your hands."

In elegiac vignettes, Badkhen portrays the trick and snare of a heroic and punishing profession. Many have little choice in the matter — this is their lineage. Most leave middle school to join the ranks, first rejoicing at the cash they take home, then withering at the ocean's paucity. Still, Badkhen hints at a deeper call to the water, like the moon's pull on the tide: "an ancient desire, a genetic memory, a congenital curse."

If Joal's men thrive or perish at the mercy of the sea, its women do so at the mercy of the fisherman, many of whom take several wives despite



Above: Luncheon Pirogue in Dry Dock. **Below:** Sompot grunt (Pomadasy jubelini).



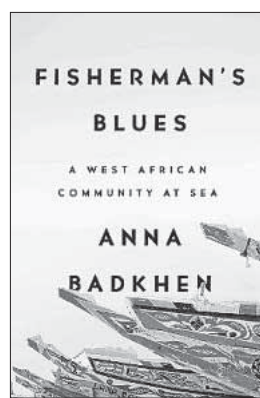
Sompot grunt

flat and shrinking incomes. Some wives are abandoned when husbands find better opportunities elsewhere, but all live in a state of perpetual, expectant waiting, hoping the sea returns the men it harbors.

This tenuous yet enduring connection between life on land and unfathomable ocean — and all the metaphors we cast into it — finds vivid re-enactment in the pages of *Fisherman's Blues*.

We come to know the town's children and elders, its spirits and superstitions. We witness a birth, a funeral, an unknown body washed ashore, the destruction and resurrection of a fishing pirogue and the rituals that solicit the ocean's gifts and benevolence. We meet the boat-builder, harbor master, double-dealing park rangers, the unwilling King of the Sea (a spiritually appointed position), and the sorceress who heals what doctors can't.

Badkhen's distinct journalistic approach places her among and outside the populace, where she dances back and forth between separate witness



Fisherman's Blues

A West African Community at Sea
Anna Badkhen
(Riverhead, \$27)

Plan your life

Anna Badkhen will read from *Fisherman's Blues* on Tuesday at the Dallas Institute of Humanities, 2719 Routh St., Dallas. 6 p.m. reception, 6:30 p.m. program. \$35; discounts for members and educators. dallasinstitute.org

She'll also appear, in conversation with Ben Fountain, at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Wild Detectives, 314 W. Eighth St., Dallas.

and embraced participant. She offers an ever-widening knowledge of the culture, but ultimately fails to answer the impossible question that led her so far from home.

"Everything I thought I knew seems to flat-wash into watery vagueness," she writes, "where all definitions are charted and relearned, all lines crossed, all meanings slippery."

Her poetic style liberates the reader from the familiar, straightforward quality of traditional reportage, but her work remains equally honest and arguably more compassionate. She manages to avoid critique, and rarely projects her Western morals on the habits and predilections of her comrades, instead allowing us to notice our own.

Fisherman's Blues is Badkhen's ode to a community's fraught ties to geography, and a gentle lament for an existence eroding at the shoreline.

Cecily Sailer is a freelance writer, editor and writing coach, and programs director for the Austin Public Library Friends Foundation.

BOOKS | AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Bulgaria inspires 'a labor of love'

'The Shadow Land' explores history through lens of a wide-eyed visitor

By **JOYCE SÁENZ HARRIS**
Special Contributor

Bulgaria, for Americans, is one of the least-familiar parts of Eastern Europe. But for novelist Elizabeth Kostova, best-selling author of *The Historian*, Bulgaria is a second home, one she took to heart on her first visit in 1989.

She didn't just fall in love with the country; she met her husband there, and his surname is the one she uses. Today she is probably America's biggest cheerleader for Bulgarian writers, with a foundation that sponsors literary endeavors aimed at encouraging book translations and other cross-cultural enrichment.

In *The Historian*, her blockbuster first novel, Kostova explored Vlad the Impaler and the Dracula legend and won both critical and popular acclaim. Her most recent novel, *The Shadow Land* (Ballantine Books, \$28), also is set in Eastern Europe, but this time she explores Bulgaria's history through the eyes of a naive visitor. Kostova's deep affection for Bulgaria and its people becomes evident as her young American protagonist, Alexandra, finds herself thrown into a dangerous mystery rooted in the country's bleak Soviet-bloc past.

"*The Shadow Land* was very much a labor of love — mainly love of this beautiful small country, Bulgaria, that's



ELIZABETH KOSTOVA

largely unknown in the West," Kostova says. "It's also full of a love of re-examining the truths of history, including the harshest ones. I found it a painful, moving, thrilling book to write, certainly the best experience of my life as an author so far."

On March 18, Kostova will appear at the Dallas Museum of Art as part of the Arts & Letters Live series. She chatted by email in advance of her visit. (The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.)

What kind of special travel and research did you need to do in order to give *The Shadow Land* its authenticity?

One of the fascinating things about writing a novel about a place you think you know well is that you realize very quickly that you need to observe it all over again! During my seven years of working on *The Shadow Land*, I traveled back to a lot of landscapes in Bulgaria and to many I hadn't seen before.

I interviewed friends and family who'd lived through some of the periods I was writing about, and I read oral histories and other documents. I also had the unexpected opportunity to visit the ruins of a forced-labor camp — closed to the public — which was a life-changing, haunting experience for me.

Alexandra's adventures begin with a "no good deed goes unpunished" misstep in Sofia and

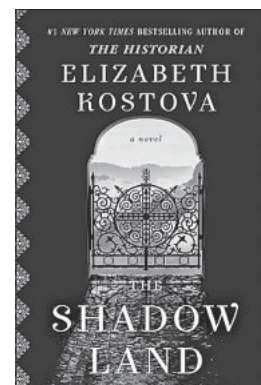
then become a sort of travelogue escorted by her guide, Bobby, who turns out to be something more than just a taxi driver. I sensed that you became very fond of Bobby, as I did. Was he inspired in part by any of the Bulgarians you have come to know over the years?

My character Bobby really did become one of my very favorites in the book. He's not based on a real person, but he does have a lot in common with some of the energetic, creative people I've met in the Sofia intellectual community, many of whom work varied jobs and wear a lot of different hats — like Bobby, they can be cynical but would also give a friend the shirt off their backs.

In *The Shadow Land*, your Bulgarian characters display a potent talent for storytelling. So I'd assume you've met some real spellbinders there who kept you as enthralled as Alexandra was. Did you find any cultural connections between Bulgarian folklore and the tales that inspired *The Historian*?

Bulgarian traditional folklore is a very rich heritage — full of heroes, menacing supernatural creatures, magical places and talking animals. In addition, a lot of the oldest people I met in Bulgaria during my first travels there had seen a long span of turbulent history.

I'll never forget listening to those villagers — a few of whom were over a hundred years old when I met them. In both *The Historian* and *The Shadow Land*, I use stories and folk songs — some of which I invented to mimic real traditions — to move the



Plan your life

Elizabeth Kostova will discuss *The Shadow Land* at 2 p.m. March 18 at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood St., as part of Arts & Letters Live. Tickets \$25; discounts for educators, students and DMA members. dma.org/all or 214-922-1818.

plot along as well as to express culture. **In what ways is your protagonist Alexandra, with her open mind and tender heart, a surrogate for yourself when you first traveled to Bulgaria in 1989, just after the Berlin Wall came down?**

The Shadow Land isn't an autobiographical novel, except in the sense that I remember very well what it was like for me to arrive in this new and culturally very different place at the age of 24 — just a couple of years younger than my character. I'm happy to say that nothing so difficult has ever happened to me in Bulgaria as what happens to my character.

Joyce Sáenz Harris is a Dallas freelance writer.

AUTHOR TOURS

Jay Gibson will sign *Men = Responsibility* at 1 p.m. today at Half Price Books, 5803 E. Northwest Highway, Dallas.

Leonard Critcher will sign *Welcome to the Metroplex!* at 1 p.m. today at Half Price Books, 5803 E. Northwest Highway, Dallas.

Daymond John will sign *Rise and Grind: How to Out-Perform, Out-Work, and Out-Hustle the Competition* at 3 p.m. today at Barnes & Noble, 7700 W. Northwest Highway, Dallas. Must have copy of book for signing line, which begins at 2 p.m.

Tom Clavin will discuss *Dodge City: Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and the Wickedest Town in the American West* at 7 p.m. Monday at Interabang Books, 10720 Preston Road, Dallas.

Penelope Bagieu will discuss *Brazen: Rebel Ladies Who Rocked the World* at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Interabang Books, 10720 Preston Road, Dallas.

Anna Badkhen will discuss *Fisherman's Blues* at two events:

■ 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Dallas Institute of Humanities, 2719 Routh St., Dallas. Reception at 6 p.m. \$35; discounts for members and educators. dallasinstitute.org.

■ 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at The Wild Detectives, 314 W. Eighth St., Dallas, in conversation with Ben Fountain (*Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*).

John Schmutz will discuss *The Bloody Fifth: The 5th Texas Infantry Regiment, Hood's Texas Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia* at noon Tuesday at The Hall of State at Fair Park, 3939 Grand Ave. Dallas.

Adam Hamilton will discuss *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times* at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Highland Park United Methodist Church, 3300 Mockingbird Lane, Dallas. \$18; includes a signed copy of the book. Register at bit.ly/DMNadamhamilton.

Kelly Barnhill will discuss *Dreadful Young Ladies and Other Stories* at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Interabang Books.

Roma Downey will sign *Box of Butterflies: Discovering the Unexpected Blessings*

All Around Us at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Barnes & Noble, 7700 W. Northwest Highway. Present a B&N receipt Monday for a wristband to save a place in line.

Addison Brae will launch and sign *Becker Circle* at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Deep Ellum Art Company, 3200 Commerce St., Dallas.

Steve Wozniak will discuss *iVoz: From Computer Geek to Cult Icon* as part of #HearHere2018 at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Winspear Opera House, 2403 Flora St., Dallas. attpac.org/on-sale/2018/steve-wozniak.

Marlene Bradford will discuss *Texas Tornadoes, The Lone Star State's Deadliest Twisters* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday the Allen Public Library, 300 N. Allen Drive.

Steve Coll will discuss *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Interabang Books, 10720 Preston Road, Dallas. \$35; includes a copy of the book. Free admission for 18 years old and younger. dfwworld.org/steve-coll.

Diane DeSanders will discuss *Hap and Hazard and the End of the World* at 7 p.m. Friday at Interabang Books.

Ken Ingle will sign *Who Killed the Killer* and other works at 3 p.m. Friday, and at 10 a.m. Saturday and March 18 at Kroger, 2110 E. Southlake Blvd., Southlake.

Jude Angelini will discuss *Hummingbird* at 7 p.m. Saturday at Interabang Books.

Email mmerschel@dallasnews.com at least two weeks in advance.