



The Romanian: Story of an Obsession

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Winner of the 2004 Prix de Flore—one of France's most distinguished literary prizes—a wildly romantic, true-life love story

History follows a trail of sputtering desire, often calling upon the delusions of lovers to generate the sparks. If it weren't for us, the world would suffer from a dismal lack of stories," writes Bruce Benderson in this brutally candid memoir.

What astonishes and intrigues is Benderson's way of recounting, in the sweetest possible voice, things that are considered shocking," wrote *Le Monde*. What's so shocking? It's not just Benderson's job translating Céline Dion's saccharine autobiography, which he admits is driving him mad; but his passion for an impoverished Romanian in "cheap club-kid platforms with dollar signs in his squinting eyes," whom he meets while on a journalism assignment in Eastern Europe.

Rather than retreat, Benderson absorbs everything he can about Romanian culture and discovers an uncanny similarity between his own obsession for the Romanian (named Romulus) and the disastrous love affair of King Carol II, the last king of Romania (1893-1953). Throughout, Benderson—"absolutely free of bitterness, nastiness, or any desire to protect himself," wrote *Le Monde*—is sustained by little white codeine pills, a poetic self-awareness, a sense of humor, and an unwavering belief in the perfect romance, even as wild dogs chase him down Romanian streets.

The Romanian: Story of an Obsession Details

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Author : Bruce Benderson

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Dimitri says

His penis slit down my throat like an eel into an inky pond

OK, that's about as graphic as the gay sex gets. By this point I'd already double-checked whether the narrator was female or not. The autobiographical angle should've been mentioned on the jacket. Later on, he refers to Death in Venice in a time of illness. This book reads like its modern, Romania-set cousin. Perhaps with a hint of Lolita, since Romulus the Romanian feels more like a gay-for-pay hustler than a bisexual.

what did you expect, Benderson ? Love ? His obsession is pathetic and infuriating.

So I picked this based on the title and the jacket description: loving travelogue, parallels with Carol II of Romania and his Jewish mistress. There is that. The royal stories are heartfelt*. The impressions of Romania's cities and countryside are far less engaging, unless he starts extolling the Transylvanian peasant in the style of Panait Istrati. The ugly side of Romania ...is true, unfortunately, with child beggars and have-nots on minimum wages (Romulu's family) that contrast sharply with the conspicuous consumption of Bucarest's young elite.

*The Playboy King: Carol II Of Romania by Paul D. Quinlan

The Last Romantic: A Biography of Queen Marie of Roumania by Hannah Pakula

Ioana says

Also found here:

I could not, for the life of me, like this story. I tried and tried, I even re-read some parts, but no.

Maybe because it's such a depressing and dark story, if you ask me. Because Romulus is nothing more than a glorified thief and prostitute, the people Bruce meets through him are the same and the Bucharest he sees is gloomy and dejected, which is not true now and wasn't true back when Benderson wrote his book.

Maybe because I never once considered that Romulus might have real feelings for Benderson or vice versa. It's an obsession and a wicked one too.

Maybe because the correlations and comparisons that Benderson makes, between his relationship with Romulus and that of Carol the second and Elena Lupescu, never felt right for me.

Maybe because I was never tempted of giving in and understanding his obsession with the young romanian or the way he managed to put him on a pedestal.

Maybe I couldn't even begin to understand the petulant and teenager like attitude that the author had towards his mother and that annoyed the crap out of me.

Maybe I just didn't like his writing or understood this book but bottom line: I did not like it.

Rick Powell says

Benderson had to publish outside of the U.S. his brilliant, funny, wildly pitched account of his relationship with a straight Romanian rent boy. I've had my own run-ins with Romanians of various sexual orientations and every word of this account rings more than true. Steeped in both culture and history and also firmly committed to his own obsessions, this is the kind of gay writing apparently American homosexuals don't want to read any more, which is more than too bad, it's a great loss.

Tutu says

Seeing a quote of this book today made me remember reading it, I think probably 3 or 4 years ago. This is not an easy book to read, you have to be in a certain state but it's worth the time you put into it(it's pretty long – I read the Romanian translation and it's almost 500 pages). I think a single word can sum up everything about this book: REAL. It's real, it's obsessive , it's painful, it's life..... for some of us. So if you like to read about happily ever after (which I do), better skip this book. If you want a different perspective on a gay man's life this could be the book for you. Not that the author needed to be gay, the story of obsession is universal.

This book really has an impact on the reader. Testimony to this is that I can still remember how it made me feel even after years of reading it. Not many books manage this. I actually can say I read books only 2 months ago that even if I enjoyed at the moment, can't really remember much about.

What I appreciated about this book was the breath of air it gives you at the end. You agonize throughout the whole book with the author, you want sometimes to escape him, to slap him, to make him see some sense. At the end I feel you are in some way rewarded. Because he offers us some perspective with a few pages written some years after his stay in Romania. It's not a happy ending, it's not the best outcome by any means, but it's life and it goes on, one way or another .

Another thing I'd like to mention is its take on Romania and Romanians. I am from Romania and it was very interesting to sit back and see it through the author's eyes. I guess I could have been easily offended but why bother. The truth is just that....the truth. I didn't feel however that the author tried to paint a bad picture of Romania while reading it. They were just his experiences. Were they real? Probably. Can they happen nowadays? I'm sure of it. But that doesn't mean that all Romanians are the same. It's just a perspective, as are others.

One thing that I strongly believe is that you only have one life and you're in your right to live it however you see fit and doing what makes you happy. Without others telling you what to do, what is right for you or imposing their lifestyle or choices on you. Would I have acted like the author? No, at least I hope not. Is it frustrating to see him living his life like that? Yes. Do I think he was wrong? No, because, as I said, it's his life. As long as he knows what he's doing it will remain his choice and only his.

David says

Liked: insight into and information on Central/Eastern Europe and its people, reminding me of my own trips to Budapest, Transylvania, and Bucharest.

Didn't like: the author's gloomy masochism on one hand and his self-indulgence on the other. The tale of obsession seems to be with the author himself, which made this story go on and on. Instead, the book could have made its points in half the pages. At points in several sections I wanted to yell, "ok... I get it, you've made your point, please move on."

David Corvine says

Found the regurgitated history/art material tedious and irrelevant, any linkage was tenuous. Overall the work was fantastic... but unfortunately not in a good way. The narrator is a fantasist imaging or manufacturing "dramatic" situations. If you block book a sex worker to the exclusion of all other clients it doesn't mean you are in a relationship. The narrator sometimes displays flash of realizing that he is self-deluded but continues to behave in the same illogical manner.

Chris says

The writing itself is more than fine, I just didn't like what the book is about-it wore on me. Somewhat affluent (not too cute) gay man from New York falls "in love" with Romanian hustler and I think we're supposed to sympathize with writer but I just felt sorry for the 21 year old Romanian.

Sketchbook says

Famous liner on why many favor (het/hs) *pross de touts*: *They leave after an hour.*

In fact, I knew a French film producer who'd say, c 8 am, "Cherie, you must go now. The maid will be here shortly." If you don't understand these 2 *grafs*, you're naïf and know nothing of life.

Herein, author Benderson, in his mid50s+, who has been around, arrives in Budapest to do an article on the underbelly sex trade, and, first night, meets a lad (Romulus, age 24) and instantly is smitten beyond belief. Romy is allegedly het, but his willy is always stiff, even for gf who works as a whore for a wretched chink. "Welcome to Budapest!" Or Prague or Bucharest. Song: "Love for sale."

Benderson comes across as an inexperienced (but nice?) jerk from Syracuse, NY, where his Jewish mutti is needy and dying. Over the next 8 mos, Romy does nothing but watch TV -- *what do these two talk about??* -- while author translates a Celine Dion tasket of trash. I have no idea who Romy is...(probably a composite of 3 or 4 types)... and the author's smug story of his "obsession" goes nowhere. It is a bore. Remember the riveting story of Philip & Mildred by MOM ? You couldn't put it down ! Mildred was electrifying. (I just browsed again to confirm).

Why did this 400 page novel win big French award, and so on??

Author stuffs his novel's hole, a big hole, with a history of Queen Marie of Romania (remember the Dot Parker couplet?), her son Prince Carol and his sssh! *Jewish* mistress Lupescu, which he brazenly but smoothly relates to Mutti (hence Euro award?), and then, OY !, adds more *plot* with Brancusi inserts. Hey, we're not done yet ! ~~ Amid bits of E Euro anti-sem we are confronted, minus humor or irony, with reminders of Communist vs Fascist vs Capitalist horrors.

"Calling Anita Loos for a rewrite!"

This brings up another issue for me : author photos ...the more dreary the author, the bigger the photo. I see Joan Didion and wanna OD. Well, that's one example. Here, author has semi-hed shot with haunted eyes that say, "Sex in EEuro may be fun, but there's always stress."

Woody says

I wanted a book on contemporary Romania and came across this--a memoir of one middle-aged white American's relationship/obsession with a young Romanian hustler. Reading it made me want to become friends with Bruce Benderson--he doesn't flinch away from examining anything that might be too revealing or taboo, there is a rare honesty there, and for that reason alone, I'd say this is a memoir very well worth reading.

The Sheila says

I had a hard time liking this book, mostly because Bruce Benderson seems way too impressed with his own wickedness. The historical bits and the bits with his mother are well done and interesting; the bits with Romulus (the titular Romanian) made me pretty deeply uncomfortable, if only because I felt like I was being involved in a threeway relationship that was none of my business and in which one of the parties was oblivious of my presence. (Bruce Benderson, I do not want to mess around with you behind your boyfriend's back.)

John says

A decent travel essay could probably be extracted from what is otherwise an atrocious memoir about a middle-aged gay man who claims to have been obsessed with a Romanian prostitute. I'm not familiar with the Prix de Flore, but am mystified as to how this book could even be nominated for a major literary prize. Where to begin with what is wrong here? The problems start with the author's voice, which is mostly humorless and embarrassingly vain. Bruce Benderson is way too proud of his transgressive behavior and this "memoir" feels contaminated by the apparent influence of his need to gather material for publication. Was he really THAT obsessed with Romulus (if that was indeed his really name...) or did he keep going back to Romania to gather more anecdotes for this book? It doesn't take long to figure out that the author's true obsession here is not with Romulus but with himself. Where the book completely goes off the rails is in the merciless descriptions of the author's apparently overbearing 96-year old mother. No shot is too cheap and the reader must awkwardly endure repeated digs at his mother's affinity for discount clothing. It is beyond

pathetic how Benderson delights in his mother's ignorance of his bad behavior. Here is where I have to admit to jumping ship with only 100 pages left. There is value here in observing the author's lack of self-awareness, but it was just too irritating to go on. Is it possible that a good memoir by definition recounts extraordinary challenges endured/overcome at a time when the author's actions were not influenced by potential book profits?

Bill Hsu says

It's easy to be distracted by Benderson's lusts, obsessions, and dubious life choices. (GR reviewers, you choose a Bruce Benderson book, and you're expecting nice people doing sensible things? Umm.) But the guy can write. On interactions with his mother:

I can picture her so clearly right now, frail but enlivened by the favorite topic of me --- leaning forward on the very edge of her seat at the kitchen table so as not to miss a word, scrutinizing me with attentive, worried eyes, asking probing questions and desperately hoping for all the false answers; hoping I'll materialize by some magic into the prudent, cautious traveler I wasn't.

Maja says

I read a Croatian edition, though I couldn't find it on Goodreads.

Jim Coughenour says

Few projects can sound less promising than a 400-page chronicle of a pudgy middle-aged Jew's erotic obsession with a scraggly Romanian hustler, but Bruce Benderson has written a minor classic. What so easily might have been pretentious soft-core sociology intent on justifying its author and titillating its readers has been transformed into a tale that is by turn comically masochistic, depraved, psychologically lacerating and finally luminous. There's no redemptive arc, no gratuitous groveling or ersatz wisdom. Benderson's honesty and deeply civilized, codeine-infused, depressed and decadent style lift this book echelons above the usual run of memoir.

??? ???????? says

Odlicno!!!
