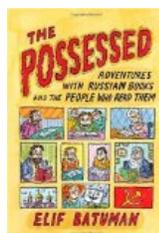




A collection of essays about the author's misadventures with Russian books and their author's legacies - Paperback



[The Possessed](#)

Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them

by [Elif Batuman](#)

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From the book jacket

Love and the novel, the individual in history, the existential plight of the graduate student: all find their place in *The Possessed*. Literally and metaphorically following the footsteps of her favorite authors, Batuman searches for the answers to the big questions in the details of lived experience, combining fresh readings of the great Russians, from Pushkin to Platonov, with the sad and funny stories of the lives they continue to influence - including her own.

Review

This is a book review of a book about a serious obsession with books. That Elif Batuman's literary fixation happens to be with Russian books almost seems arbitrary, but, in a way, also destined: Originally a linguistics major, Batuman (a Turkish American academic in comparative literature) chose Russian as her foreign language requirement, only to find the abstraction of linguistics giving way to the much more compelling stories, culture, and language of Russia itself. Looking back, Batuman writes, "Love is a rare and valuable thing, and you don't get to choose its object."

As a book reviewer who was also once a linguistics major ultimately drawn to literature, there is some inherent bias in my enthusiasm for this book. But that, in some ways, is the point of Batuman's work: Literature and life are always intersecting; the reader is bound to find symbols, comparisons, and significance at every turn; and one can't help but read one's life into the story - or the story into one's life. All disclaimers aside, however, this book is both amusing and insightful. Batuman has a rare combination of gifts as an academic and a storyteller, and *The Possessed* takes the form of a collection of essays that's part literary

About the Author



Elif Batuman was born in New York City and grew up in New Jersey, but she comes from a Turkish family. Her name, Elif, is actually the Turkish word for *alif* or *aleph*, the first letter of the Arabic and

Hebrew alphabets. Because she was born a very skinny and long baby, her parents named her after the letter, which is drawn as a straight line.

Batuman tracks the trajectory of her love affair with Russian literature in the introduction to *The Possessed*. It began with a copy of *Anna Karenina* in her grandmother's apartment. For her, this book encapsulates Russianness in its ability to be "simultaneously incredibly funny and sad," she told *The Boston Globe*.

When Batuman enrolled as a linguistics student at Harvard and chose Russian as her language requirement, she found herself increasingly drawn away from the rules of study of language as a whole and toward the much more "profoundly human" aspect of the Russian language itself. Batuman went on to complete her

criticism, part humor writing, part travelogue, and part memoir.

Batuman takes us on a literary romp through the obscure, but generally entertaining, facts and rambling tales surrounding the lives of Russian authors and their works - among them, Babel (who knew he was connected to the maker of King Kong?) and Tolstoy (Batuman tries to pass off a laughable, but not entirely implausible, proposal titled "Did Tolstoy Die of Natural Causes or Was He Murdered? A Forensic Investigation"). In this combination of wit and intellect, Batuman's style bears resemblance to Sarah Vowell, bringing a wry, comic voice to a nerdy, esoteric subject. Only in *The Possessed* could a graduate student named Joshua Sky Walker describe the 90-year-old daughter of Russian writer Isaac Babel as "hot." Or a famous professor of comparative literature give someone the finger in a parking lot. At one point, the narrator even dreams she is playing tennis with Tolstoy with a goose for a racket.

These would be the larger-than-life happenings of fiction, and yet Batuman's circumstances show she couldn't have made this ludicrous stuff up. In one episode, she takes on a stint as a researcher for the Turkey edition of a *Let's Go* travel guide, only to find that her aunt, an officer in the Turkish National Intelligence Organization, has enlisted the help of people all over the country to look out for her. A chauffeur picks her out of a crowd at a nightclub to take her home. A municipal water inspector somehow knows to meet her at the bus stop in Tokat.

Though some of Batuman's ramblings on the finer points of Russian literature bear the mark of a true fanatic, such immersion in the overwhelming details seems fitting for a book about obsession. Other Russian enthusiasts may in fact find these passages the most riveting, but for the less well-versed, Batuman's prose seems liveliest in the main narrative drawn from her academic life - a thread she carries throughout. What makes Batuman's tales of absurdity more than just entertaining, though, is her genuine belief in the notion that books change you. It's fitting that one of the works that's most deeply affected her is Foucault's essay on *Don Quixote*, which leads Batuman to realize that in setting out "to find - or create - resemblances between the word and the world," Quixote had "broken the binary of life and literature." *Don Quixote*, she writes, "could only have been written by someone who really loved chivalric romances, really wanted his life to resemble them more closely, and understood just what it would cost."

In a similar way, Batuman has also made her life vulnerable to books. The title of her book is drawn from Dostoevsky's novel *The Demons*, which was originally translated as "The Possessed." Yet it also stands for falling under the kind of spell that only the truly impassioned could understand. As Batuman writes, "Wasn't the point of love that it made you want to learn more, to immerse yourself, to become possessed?" There is a redemptive quality to Batuman's belief that "if the answers exist in the world or in the universe... [literature is] where we're going to find them." As a fellow lover of books, who am I to disagree?

doctorate in comparative literature at Stanford University, where she currently teaches in the Interdisciplinary Humanities program. But in *The Possessed*, Batuman confesses, "I wanted to be a writer, not an academic." She goes on to say, "I realized that I would greatly prefer to think of literature as a profession, an art, a science, or pretty much anything else, rather than a craft. What did craft ever try to say about the world, the human condition, or the search for meaning?"

Nevertheless, Batuman's intention was always to write, and she had intended to complete a novel after college. Her first journalistic piece was about a former Thai kickboxing champion and was published in *The New Yorker*. "Babel in California," the first essay in *The Possessed*, ran in 2005 in the journal *n+1*, for which she is a senior writer. Other essays in the collection also first appeared in various other publications, including *Harpers* and *The New Yorker*. For readers who can't get enough of Batuman's smart sense of humor, check out her [blog](#).



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