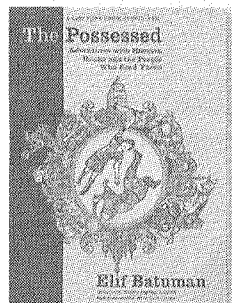


nonfiction

To Russia with love

One woman's literary quest becomes a wild ride on the cross-cultural highway

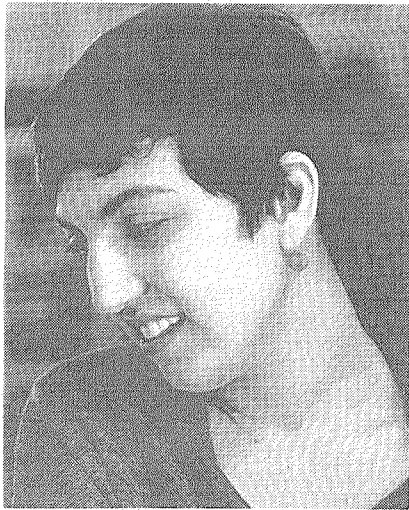


The Possessed: Adventures in Russian Books and the People Who Read Them
by Elif Batuman

Granta, £16.99 * £15.29; 304pp

Neel Mukherjee

What a strange book this is: wildly original, creatively rambling (a compliment), barely coherent in structure; a book like no other that has sprung *ex nihilo* from the dauntingly erudite and slightly crazy (compliment again) mind of its author. The subtitle of Elif Batuman's *The Possessed* may lead you to believe that it is about the abiding giants of Russian literature — Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky et al — yet it is no such thing, or only tangentially about them. Those tangents themselves are unexpected, mad and left-field. An example: a chapter on Tolstoy is actually about the International Tolstoy Conference on the author's estate, Yasnaya Polyana, where idiosyncratic academics present uproariously recherché and sometimes downright ridiculous papers, and Batuman herself an absurd one on a far-fetched conspiracy theory about Tolstoy's death. The antics of the somewhat demented academics culminate with an event involving incontinence and refusal to part with soiled underwear on a bus journey to Chekhov's house. Rib-breakingly hilarious, yes, as if we have strayed into an absurdist farce, but also quite clever — for it smuggles in an entertaining potted biography of Tolstoy, the relationship between Chekhov and Tolstoy, and information about a little-



MASTERS Chekhov and Tolstoy are tackled from a tangent by Batuman, below left

known Tolstoy play called *The Living Corpse*.

Throughout *The Possessed*, Batuman, a "Russianist" at Stanford and now a member of the comparative literature faculty there, comes to things at a tilt, looking at them through glasses designed by a madman. The result is the funniest book I've read in a long time: its deadpan, dry humour and its accumulation of absurdities will leave you rolling on your floor with laughter. After an introduction that outlines her reasons for pursuing literary studies over an MFA in creative writing — she wanted to write a novel — she launches into the circus that is academia through the events leading to, and during, a conference in Stanford on Isaac Babel, the author of the *Red Cavalry* stories, who was killed in 1941 in one of Stalin's purges. Genuine illumination about Babel's life and writings runs in counterpoint to the madcap capers of some insane people on both sides of the academic-layperson divide. It is like watching an Ionesco play written by the

illegitimate love child of Louis Theroux and Anne Fadiman.

The Possessed cracks open the giant edifice of Russian literature and reaches for the gleaming jewels of new meaning inside. Batuman looks not only at literature but also at the fiercely complicated ways books relate to and touch life. This is nowhere more marked than in the three intermittent chapters that provide the book with its spine, "Summer in Samarkand".

Staying at the home of a woman called Gulya in Samarkand, Batuman gamely attempts to learn the Uzbek language — tutored by a philosophy graduate student called Muzaffar, whose speciality is the Marburg school of neo-Kantians (no, me neither) — in an effort to arrive at a new understanding of Russian from the margins of the Eastern Turkic languages spoken in countries that used to be part of the USSR.

But a personal quest impels her too: being of Turkish origin, she had wanted to reconcile her genetic being, as it were, with her intellectual passion: the Uzbek

language is related to Turkish and Russian. She concludes, in a moment of sadness, that no such reconciliation is possible, but the trajectory of the education gives the book some of its most blazingly funny incidents and, characteristically, a gemlike nugget of knowledge or revelation on each page. While you're weeping with laughter at, say, the consistently bizarre and outlandish pronouncements of Dilorom, Batuman's Old Uzbek literature tutor, or the comic descriptions, steeped in bathos and a kind of baffled incredulity, of said Uzbek literature, you also end up wiser about what the Soviets did to the Uzbek language, about Pushkin's Turkish travelogue, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Alisher Navoi (the Uzbek Shakespeare), Uzbek bread...

If you think that these are outside the domain of your interests, think again, for Batuman will keep you gripped and laughing as she takes you on this tour. You emerge delighted and educated: this book is perfectly Horatian in marrying the *dulce* and the *utile*, which the poet defined as the defining criteria of art. But if there is an absurdist strain running under the music of the book, making much of it appear a bit mad and a bit too loosely structured, there is method in that madness. Take the last chapter, titled "The Possessed" (at last!), which deals with Dostoevsky's *Demons*

Batuman comes to things at a tilt, looking at them through glasses designed by a madman

(also translated as *The Possessed*). Here Batuman brings such utterly disparate things together — the eponymous Dostoevsky novel; a visit to Florence, where Dostoevsky finished *The Idiot*; her obsessive on-off relationship with a charismatic and deranged Croatian fellow graduate student at Stanford called Matej — that the very contiguity, unimagined before, yields a new set of meanings.

The glue binding all these seemingly unrelated things is an influential 1961 book by René Girard, *Desire, Deceit and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Recondite? On the contrary, the book is a lens through which she looks at her own life as a literary scholar and academic-in-training, at her private life, and her thesis of academic scholarship as a form of madness. Here is lit-crit as self-revelation.

Ranging across California, Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Italy, *The Possessed* then turns out to be picaresque, a grand journey undertaken to unlock the answers that literature holds and, like all great journeys, adds to the sum total of your life by bringing to it a kind of happiness that you might have forgotten could be offered by books.

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