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'I thought racism and sexism were over. I was in for a rude awakening'

Elif Batuman

The author and New Yorker writer explains why her future lies in fiction

Interview by Paul Laity

In 1995 Elif Batuman started her first year at Harvard; she was in love with fiction and determined to become a writer. The child of immigrants from Turkey, she had a first name that was unfamiliar in New Jersey, where she grew up, and which had to be constantly spelled out and explained. She has said since that its four letters suggest a fitting joke about writerly aspiration: if the initial desire in a novel is to capture all of life, what is actually produced is just another set of words, a file.

When we meet, Batuman laughingly tells me that "even when I was very small, my mother treated me like a great novelist. She was like: 'Oh, I'm sitting at the breakfast table with Flaubert,' and would say, if she burned some food, or was late arriving: 'Don't put this in your novel!'" Such confidence turned out to be justified: Batuman's *The Possessed*, a comic foray into the academic world of Russian literature, was a bestselling "bibliomemoir" before such books became fashionable. She is a much admired New Yorker staff writer, who enriches her reporting with dry humour and self-revelation (her therapy, her unhappiness in love). And she has now produced her first novel, *The Idiot*, centred on Selin, a Turkish-American woman, who, in 1995, begins her first year at Harvard; she is in love with fiction and already determined to become a writer ...

A coming-of-age story set over 12 months, the novel recounts Selin's "awkward, embarrassing experiences" as a new undergraduate, and draws heavily on Batuman's freshman year. "I don't think I'll be pulling the veil from anyone's eyes," she has written, "when I reveal that I myself had many such experiences aged 18." Selin is an outsider, as naive as she is intellectually hungry. In many ways, she resembles a Martian perplexed by strange student behaviour - walking around, according to Batuman, as if saying "What is this sex that you speak of?" and "why do I have to drink alcohol?"

As Batuman did, Selin avoids taking subjects she had studied at high school, and ends up learning Russian and theorising about linguistics (Batuman can read or speak seven languages). Selin is painfully questioning of relationships, and is determined to lead a life "unmarred by laziness, cowardice and conformity".

"As a novelist you write about social mores," Batuman says, "but not everything can be explained. You want to make the familiar strange and memorable again, and an easy shortcut is to make your protagonist young, clueless and innocent." Just as *The Possessed* is a book about misunderstandings and mistakes made by an amusingly confused graduate scholar, so *The Idiot* (which also borrows its title from a Dostoevsky novel) has fun transporting the reader back to the pain and embarrassment that come with a stage younger still. Selin is trying to work out how to be a writer, and how to live - or as she puts it: "How to dispose of my body in space and time, every minute of the day, for the rest of my life."

The Idiot is also consciously a historical novel, set in the days before smartphones and Wikipedia. On the day of her arrival at university, Selin is given her first email address: handed an ethernet cable, she asks: "What do we do with this, hang ourselves?" Email is still exciting: "Always there ... was a glowing list of messages," some so different from a formal letter that they felt "like they were being beamed straight from people's brains. And each message contained the one that had come before, so your own words came back to you ... the story of the intersection of your lives with others."

PORTRAIT BY DAN TEPFER FOR THE GUARDIAN

Elif Batuman ... 'As a novelist, you want to make the familiar strange and memorable again'

Selin begins an email relationship with Ivan, a Hungarian maths major who is in her Russian class. She enjoys their odd, pretentious exchanges, and though unsure about meeting him face to face, begins to write herself into a romantic narrative: "I wanted to know how it was going to turn out, like flipping ahead in a book." Given that Batuman specialises in finding humour in the gap between plots and reality - how things are supposed to be, and how they turn out - it's no spoiler to reveal that Selin and Ivan don't find lifelong happiness.

Batuman was keen to write about "the struggle for a girl to find meaning outside of the romance plot". The "tension in the book was there in my life, and I imagine is still there in the lives of a lot of young women. There's almost something degrading about putting all of your being into the search for the love of a man. Yet everything is *still* set up so that a relationship with a man who treats you right is the measure of happiness." Such an attitude exists even among feminists, she maintains, giving examples from Tina Fey's *30 Rock* and an onstage conversation between Lena Dunham and Ariel Levy.

> **For a woman, being in a heterosexual relationship is always implicitly a little bit humiliating**

One reader, Batuman has noted, "was angry at me" because she "spent the whole book waiting for" Selin and Ivan to have sex. This, she believes, "is the same voice, articulating from the same power supply, that makes people constantly ask: 'Do you have a boyfriend? ... Being in a heterosexual relationship for a woman is always implicitly a little bit humiliating."

In the second half of the novel, Selin journeys to Hungary in the belief that, by doing so, she will understand Ivan better, and is disoriented when the love plot doesn't run its course. Batuman has said that her own episodes of depression have come when she has been unable to see herself in "any kind of story ... It's the same with a breakup ... the other person leaves and takes the story with them. And you're left there ... falling through space."

The lack of structure in the second half of *The Idiot* deliberately mirrors Selin's lack of control over her own narrative. A decade ago, Batuman wrote a polemic against the crafted, controlled fiction that was coming out of creative writing courses. Literature, she insisted, should encompass "all the irrelevant garbage" of life. "American writers, break out of the jail!" the essay concluded: "Write long novels, pointless novels. Do not be ashamed to grieve about personal things." Though the literary landscape has since changed, it seems unlikely that Batuman will ever write a novel that isn't also a set of thoughts about what fiction can or should be.

"Even though I had a deep conviction that I was good at writing," Selin considers, "and that in some way I already was a writer, this conviction was completely independent of my having ever written anything." Batuman felt the same. As an undergraduate she scribbled stories and diaries, and took up a graduate place at Stanford because "they paid you to read novels". In the middle of her course, aged 23, she took time off to try her hand at fiction, and wrote about her first year as a student. When these efforts came to nothing, she returned to graduate study, and enjoyed a "very heady, exciting time" at Stanford, "pure and intellectually supercharged". *The Possessed* is about being "caught up" in literature in such a way, "the feeling of being possessed by reading and thinking about books"; in it, the work of writers such as Babel, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky become almost a religion. "*Eat, Pray, Love* for the PhD set" was one summary, which would make more sense if it captured how funny *The Possessed* is, in the manner of the best campus novels.

Batuman originally planned to write the book as a novel, but was told nobody wanted to read fiction about a depressed graduate student. When her essays were greeted with acclaim, she, almost by accident, became a non-fiction writer, and was taken up by the New Yorker. Having difficulty writing a novel about her life after *The Possessed*, she kept being drawn to flashbacks of a more innocent time. "And I sat there thinking: why am I trying to remember college, aged 38 like a chump, when I wrote a whole book about this?" She retrieved her early undergraduate fictional effort from the Cloud and rewrote it to become *The Idiot*.

From now on she seems set on making her books fictional, not least because "a lot of what I write is very personal" and it seems more civil "to change a few things". Her writing might be linked to the current trend for "autofiction" (as in the autobiographical novels of Rachel Cusk and Karl Ove Knausgaard), but Batuman is dismissive of the novelty of such a practice: "Really well-intentioned people tell me: 'Wow, you're exploding the boundary between fiction and non-fiction.' And I'm like: didn't Proust explode that more than a hundred years ago?"

She has admiration for writers who simply "invent stuff that didn't happen ... But other people, like me, are interested in understanding the things that actually happen to them ... my life is a mystery as it is." If Proust were to be writing now, she has said, publishers would make his work nonfiction, with "a colon in the title. It'd be In Search of Lost Time: The Rememberer's Journey."

One of the two novels Batuman is working on is a Selin sequel, which will be similarly autobiographical, and also about books (Breton, Kierkegaard, Huysmans). It will feature more sex than *The Idiot*, she says, and will reflect further on Selin's attempt to live an unconventional, aesthetic life, when all the classic literature she reads about seducing and abandoning gives the active role to men. I remind Batuman of a comment she made a few years ago: "I think sex is a really big problem that people don't acknowledge enough." She laughs: "Yes, that sounds like me."

The second novel, to be called *Swan Park*, is in part about the secular-religious split in Turkey, where she lived between 2010 and 2013, and the political polarisation of America. "The impetus came directly from my experience of being in Brooklyn last summer, and of watching the Trump campaign gather momentum, and the way the polls were so wrong about Trump and Brexit." It made her think of political theorist Hannah Arendt's idea of the "invisible forces" that people feel oppress them. "I used not to think of myself as a political writer," she says, but she now realises that "the novel can do political writing that no other discourse can". Fiction still has "the power to change our minds ... like it did in the days of Huck Finn".

Batuman contrasts today's political moment, and the rise of identity politics, with the background to *The Idiot* - the mid-1990s, post-cold war illusion of "the end of history". She recalls her own undergraduate days: "I felt that making too much of having a Turkish identity, or feeling it too strongly, was something I should get over. It was the same with feminism. I shouldn't say 'woe is me, I'm a girl', I should just work harder ... I thought: racism is over, sexism is over, bigotry is over. I was in for a rude awakening."

I suggest that the fake news associated with Trump's presidency will only strengthen the hand of those who want to draw a simple line between novels and nonfiction. Ever the evangelist for fiction, Batuman responds with the thought that "there's something about novelistic truth that is actually anathema to fake news. Novels have to hold together as some kind of story you can enter into, and to make sense from all perspectives. It's that kind of plausibility that makes a novel feel true, as opposed to just the accuracy of each piece of information." After all, she has reminded us, Tolstoy didn't think he was "detracting from the truth-telling power" of a book by writing it as a novel.

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