

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH RUSSIA'S GREATEST ...

THE POSSESSED: ADVENTURES WITH RUSSIAN BOOKS AND THE PEOPLE WHO READ THEM

by Elif Batuman
(Granta, £16.99)

RICHARD GODWIN

EARLY ON in *The Possessed*, Elif Batuman – who may yet turn out to be Mikhail Bulgakov reincarnated as a Turkish-American female – describes her feelings on reading Anna Karenina as a teenager. Idling on her grandmother's velvet sofa in Ankara, she found in the novel an "otherworldly perfection"; it occupied "a supercharged gray zone between nature and culture".

The Possessed is an account of Batuman's subsequent possession by Russian literature and her post-grad career at Stanford University and it comes to occupy its own supercharged gray zone between literary criticism, travelogue, campus novel and memoir.

Batuman is interested in the ways in which literature can enrich real life and the delight of this book is how her adventures – learning Uzbek in Samarkand, organising an Isaac Babel conference in California, visiting a reconstruction of Empress Anna's ice palace in St Petersburg – come to be "foreshadowed and benighted" by the very authors she is studying. It is also a defence of literary academia over creative writing classes as a route to becoming a writer: "What did craft ever try to say about the world, the human condition, or the search for meaning?" she asks in her introduction.

Back on her grandma's sofa, Batuman was particularly struck by the fact that both Anna's husband and her lover are

called Alexei, while her daughter and maid are also called Anna: "The repetition of names struck me as remarkable, surprising, and true to life," she remarks. Undertaking a survey of contemporary American short stories for a magazine, she finds the names of the characters false and contrived. In *Lady with the Lapdog*, Chekhov doesn't even name the lapdog, she notes. "No American short story writer would have had the stamina not to name that lapdog."

As her narratives take shape, Batuman is determined to bring to lived events some of that otherworldly perfection she finds in Russian literature. She writes like a dream, in all senses: with a New Yorker-ish precision (she is currently the magazine's Istanbul corre-

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spondent) but always animated by the uncanny, surreal and profound. She has a vision of an Alice in Wonderland-esque game of tennis with Tolstoy, her racket a goose. She ponders the significance of Isaac Babel's rubber duck. When her Uzbek literature teacher expresses a desire to take her to a fountain in which Mecca is visible and she wonders which would be worst, "to pretend to see Mecca, to admit I didn't see it ... or actually to see it."

The reader hoping for a whistlestop tour of Russian literature may find her diffuse impressions frustrating. Those who bring a little love of their own to the table will simply delight in her creative response to the canon. In Samarkand, it is with a Gogolian eye

that she observes a chicken walking around importantly, "like some kind of regional manager". At a Tolstoy conference at that writer's estate, the ghost of Pnin lurks in an old Czech academic, who soils himself. In an episode apparently dreamed up by Daniel Khairns, she finds herself judging a "boys' legs contest" in Hungary, which for some reason left me in tears of laughter.

It seems wrong to complain that a book is too funny but, occasionally, Batuman's coolly phrased incredulity feels an easy response to Russia's cruel absurdities. In the last episode, however, Batuman uses the concept of mimetic desire to compare one of her own love affairs with Dostoevsky's novel *The Devils* in a way that is not merely funny, but insightful and touching. It is not often that the concept of mimetic desire is used in this fashion. The highest compliment you can pay such a book is that it sends you back to the original authors refreshed. I can go one higher – I found myself simply wanting to read more from Elif Batuman.

Writing like a dream, in all senses: Elif Batuman's New Yorker-ish precision is always animated by the uncanny, surreal and profound



HURON ANGIN

AT SEA IN THE FOG OF INSTANT COMMUNICATION

THE INFORMATION: A HISTORY, A THEORY, A FLOOD

by James Gleick
(4th Estate, £25)

JOY LO DICO

The flood of information has long had its detractors. In 1889, the *Spectator* carried a hand-wringing article about the deleterious effect of the age's internet, the telegraph: "All men are compelled to think of all things, at the same time on imperfect information, and with too little interval for reflection," it claimed, bemoaning "the constant diffusion of statements in snippets".

With that gripe in mind, James Gleick's new book *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood* attempts to tell the story of how a trickle turned into a deluge. He starts in Africa with the beating of drums. With just taut skin or hollowed-out wood, a drummer could send a message that would be repeated for miles around, faster than the carrier pigeons the



Obscure stars: brilliant 1950s information theorist Claude Shannon

Rothschild banking family used to send and receive financial information. Only in 1914 did a missionary finally decipher for the Western world what had seemed primitive and inexplicable.

The drums worked by stripping out meaning and reducing content to a code, copying the tonal changes in African words.

In Europe and America, a different beat had emerged, the dot-dash-pause of Morse code humming through the telegraph wires, pushing messages across of hundreds of miles and, in turn, collapsing distance.

It was not just language that was being repackaged into alternative units. So, too, were mathematics and physical sciences. The 18th-century early computer, never quite finished by Charles Babbage, was designed to process numbers through its cogs and latches. Its inspiration was the punch cards used in Jacquard looms to create repetitive pattern, the simple information that would create beautiful textiles. (The punch card would return for early IBM computers.)

When the genome was finally understood, it was found to carry a code for life in a neat double helix, deceptively simple given the complexity of what it creates.

Computers and the internet, the great diffusers of "snippets of information" run on a binary code, where every state is either on or off. Shrunken down, simplified and codified, information

began to move and multiply endlessly. That's the history, and it is told elegantly by Gleick, helped along by a patchwork of entertaining anecdotes. However, *The Information* loses its way when it moves into the second half of the 20th century, and into theoretical territory. A hectic journey through quantum physics, randomness, Alan Turing's proof of uncomputability and the question of whether information is finite or infinite leaves one swamped, and Gleick's usual ability to elucidate the most complex ideas seems to have escaped him here.

After the theory comes the deluge, which Gleick illustrates with Wikipedia, the infinite digital library

once imagined as the Library of Babel by Borges. Gleick is not the first to use that analogy but it is a useful route into discussing a website that embodies the crisis of the glut of information. Facts grow on trees, Wikipedia editors argue about what is worth preserving, and truths and falsehoods rub shoulders too readily.

The *Information* begins with the human drive to transform a chaotic world into a clear system of signals and codes that can spread easily. It ends, echoing the *Spectator's* fretting from a century ago, in a new chaotic meta-world of information where we have to search for meaning anew.

The *Information* is not a masterpiece of the order of Gleick's 1987 book *Chaos*. Although some parts convey his excitement – he has something of a crush on Charles Babbage's collaborator Ada Lovelace, and also introduces the obscure but brilliant 1950s information theorist Claude Shannon to a wider audience – many of the big ideas Gleick puts forward get lost in the background noise.