

BOOKS

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FICTION

'The Idiot':

An unlikely college crush simmering in emails

'The Idiot' by Elif Batuman, 423 pages. Penguin Press. \$27.

BY DWIGHT GARNER
THE NEW YORK TIMES
ove, as Thomas Pynchon wrote, reviewing Gabriel Garcia Márquez's novel "Love in the Time of Cholera" in The New York Times Book Review in 1988 and quoting Mickey and Sylvia's 1956 hit single, love is strange.

Elif Batuman's first novel, "The Idiot," is in part about the unlikely and consuming crush that Selin, the daughter of Turkish immigrants, develops on an older mathematics student from Hungary during her freshman year at Harvard.

It is unclear, for hundreds of pages, whether this crush is requited. Meanwhile, the reader, palm crushed into forehead, thinks, "Poor Selin, what are you doing to yourself?"

"The Idiot" is set in 1995. Blues Traveler plays on Discmans. Mix tapes are still units of emotional currency. Students type with green cursors on black screens.

Email is new, and Selin intuitively knows it. "Each message contained the one that had come before, and so your own words came back to you — all the words you threw out, they came back," Batuman writes. "It was like the story of your relations with others, the story of the intersection of your life with other lives, was constantly being recorded and updated and you could check it at any time."

Anyone who has followed Batuman's work will not be surprised to learn that Selin first falls for Ivan, the Hungarian student, because she adores his email

messages. Batuman is a language freak and geek. You can imagine one of her characters becoming attracted to someone who did a woman in Norman Rush's last novel, "Subtle Bodies," because he was "verbal looking."

Herself the daughter of Turkish immigrants and a graduate of Harvard, Batuman is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "The Possessed: Adventures With Russian Books and the People Who Read Them" (2010). That book was a witty and melancholy tour de force about reading and love and the pleasures of travel as against tourism.

That same voice is poured into "The Idiot." It's memorable to witness Selin, in Batuman, absorb the world around her. Each paragraph is a small anthology of well-made observations.

Only Batuman would send a character in search of new clothes and have her think, "what was 'Cinderella,' if not an allegory for the fundamental unhappiness of shoe shopping?"

Selin notes the "death roar" of an institutional toilet. She observes her, lighting a cigarette, "when the flame came into contact with the paper, it

made a sound like the needle coming down on a record player."

Small pleasures will have to sustain you over the long haul of this novel. "The Idiot" builds little narrative or emotional force. It is like a beautiful neon sign made without a plug.

No glow it cast. We're told Selin falls for Ivan. He gives good email. He is also, as one of her friends puts it, "a seven-foot-tall Hungarian guy who stares at everyone like he's trying to see through their souls."

Selin tells us about the force of her longing. "Every sound, every syllable that reached me," she says, "I wanted to filter through his consciousness."

But we never feel this longing in our bones. I'm reminded of the acting coach's dictum that it's not important that the actor cry; it's important that the audience does.

After 100 pages, I was done with Ivan and wanted Selin to be done, too. I wished, as if she were an avatar in a video game, to point her in a different direction.

Selin is not done with him. The summer after her freshman year she travels to the Hungarian countryside to teach English and perhaps to see him on weekends.

She consumes a lot of food with sour cream in it. She judges a contest to see which students have the best legs. She frets.

Sexual heat is at a minimum. This is too bad because Batuman has a rich sense of the details of human attachment and lust.

Watching Ivan dig into his pockets for coins, for example, Selin thinks: "An amazing sight, someone you're infatuated with trying to fish something out of a jeans pocket."

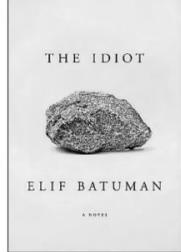
That line beamed me back to my own freshman year at college. "The Idiot" — at the rate Batuman is burning through the titles of Dostoevsky novels, her next one will be called "Necotchka Nenazonova" — reminded me of Martin Amis' complaint about "Pride and Prejudice": "That novel's only flaw, he said, 'is the absence of a 30-page sex scene between Elizabeth and Darcy.'"

There are two things I admire about this novel. One is the touchy-feel sense, here as in everything Batuman writes, that books are force of her longing. "Every sound, every syllable that reached me," she says, "I wanted to filter through his consciousness."

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THE IDIOT
ELIF BATUMAN

Book reveals layers of tragedy

BY COLETTE BANCROFT

EMMETT TILL
turns out, died for a reason, only the worst reasons: racism, ignorance and fear.

And he did not die for the reason raised at the trial of the two men accused of his murder in 1955: that Till, a black 14-year-old boy, had come into a store in the town of Money, Miss., and assaulted the young white woman behind the counter, "grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities."

That never happened. Timothy B. Tyson's new book, "The Blood of Emmett Till," skillfully tells the story of the gruesome murder and its still resonant aftermath. It's hardly a new story — except that Tyson reports that Carolyn Bryant, the woman who accused Till and whose husband was one of the killers, told him 50 years later that the most incendiary part of her story was "not true."

Tyson, a historian at Duke University, in 2004 published "Blood Done Sign My Name," an award-winning nonfiction account of a 1970 lynching in the North Carolina town where he lived as a boy, a murder that had some similarities to the Till case.

Carolyn Bryant Donham (she remarried after her first husband's death) read that book and in 2005 invited Tyson for coffee and pound cake and a confession: Till never touched her or said anything suggestive. Her sympathies, she said, went out to his mother.

"Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him," she said.

Tyson's book opens with that newly revealed information, and the rest of the book makes clear that there was never any good reason that Emmett Till died. But his heartbroken mother, Mamie Bradley, found a way to mourn her only child that changed history.

The book places the crime in its larger cultural and historical context. Bradley was born in Mississippi but was working and raising Emmett, a cheerful youngster who loved to bake and play baseball, in Chicago, a rigorously segregated city.

In the summer of 1955, she sent him, along with a couple of cousins, to stay for a while at the farm of his uncle and aunt, Moses and Elizabeth Wright, near the hamlet of Money.

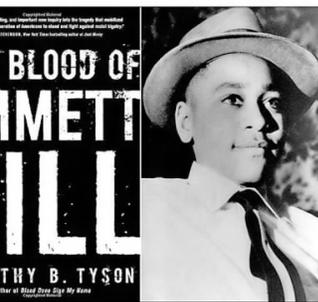
Along with several young relatives, Till went to a general store run by Carolyn and Roy Bryant and mostly black shoppers. He said something that Carolyn took as an insult. Word spread, and Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, kidnapped Till from his uncle's house in the middle of the night. His aunt was so frightened she left town hours after he was kidnapped and never returned.

Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River three days later, one of the terrible details Tyson notes is that Till's relatives and the county sheriff knew where to look along the banks because the bodies of so many other lynching victims had been pulled from that river.

At the time, Tyson writes, "Mississippi outstripped the rest of the nation in virtually every measure of lynching: the greatest number of lynchings, the most lynchings per capita, the most lynchings without an arrest or conviction, the most female victims, the most multiple lynchings, and on and on and on.

The boy's body was in a horrific state: skull crushed, one eye missing and the other hanging on his cheek, a bullet hole beside his ear. A 150-pound man was secured to his neck with hand wires, in a futile attempt to sink the corpse.

Instead, Till's body rose, first in the river, then before the eyes of the world. Although the sheriff of the county where he was found tried to have the body buried



THE BLOOD OF EMMETT TILL
TIMOTHY B. TYSON

immediately, Bradley not only had her son sent back to Chicago but insisted on an open-casket funeral. She "would leverage the only influence America's racial caste system granted her: public grief and moral outrage sufficient to shame and anger some fraction of the nation."

Photographs of Till's body appeared in Jet and Ebony and in black newspapers, and then everywhere, including the still new and powerful medium of television. His death became a galvanizing event in the growing civil rights movement — even as his killers were acquitted, after one hour's deliberation (they stretched it out by ordering sandwiches) by a jury of 12 white men. Bryant and Milam would later suggestingly describe the killing, secure in knowing they couldn't be prosecuted again, when Look magazine offered them \$1,500 each for their stories.

Tyson's account of the times helps the reader understand the climate in which Till's murder occurred. The early stirrings of civil rights grew as black veterans returned from World War II unwilling to accept the old racial hierarchy. As veteran and activist Annie Moore said, "Everywhere we went, we were faced with this evil

thing — segregation. If we were here fighting for the four freedoms that Roosevelt and Churchill talked about, then certainly we felt that the American soldier should be free first." That newfound assertiveness frightened many white Southerners, and they were also incensed by the U.S. Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954, which called for the integration of public schools. The backlash to all that included the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the birth of its white-collar cousin, the Citizens Council, which writer Lillian Smith called "a well-bred mob." Made up of white bankers, lawyers, businessmen and others, it grew from its founding in 1944 to 60,000 members a year later. Blacks who tried to register to vote or joined such organizations as the NAACP would lose their jobs, their credit, their mortgages — and sometimes, when economic threats didn't work, their lives.

One of the most persistent stereotypes that drove such white supremacist groups was a terror of "race-mixing," sexual contact especially between black men and white women. That threat crept into Carolyn Bryant's

testimony — even though she never mentioned that element in her first interviews with police. It became part of the killers' defense, even though they pleaded innocent, Tyson writes: "The boy had it coming, in other words, but our clients did not kill him. In fact, although it was his fault if he was dead, he might not even be dead." (Oh yes, there was also a conspiracy theory that the body in the river wasn't Till's.)

Carolyn Bryant's confession adds yet another layer of tragedy and irony to Emmett Till's story. Tyson reminds us that it's a story that is not over. Young black men still die for no good reason, no reason at all. And as white supremacist Dylan Roof gunned down nine black members of a Bible study class in church in Charleston in 2015, he told them his reason: "You rape our women and you're taking over our country."

Just as Mamie Bradley's decision shone essential light on what happened to her son, so does this book. As Tyson writes, "The bloody and unjust arc of our history will not bend upward if we merely pretend that history did not happen here. We cannot white-wash our past without confronting it."