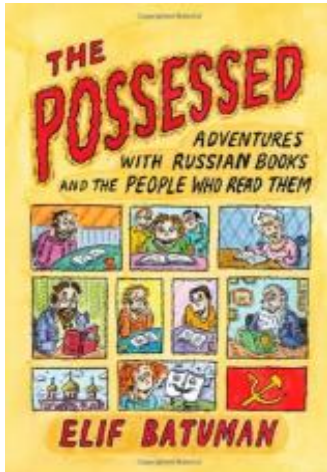


The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them

by Elif Batuman



About the Book

Nested like a Russian matryoshka doll, Elif Batuman's **The Possessed** is a captivating book about books, filled with sketches of eccentric authors, existential angst among their fans, awkward encounters with authors' descendants, and a quirky literary history that infinitely leads to even quirkier mysteries. Blending homage, memoir, travelogue, and wry comedy, *The Possessed* is more than a portrait of obsession with Russian literature; it is a full-scale diorama for anyone who loves the printed word, or whose life has been shaped by fictional characters.

The essays include "Babel in California," in which Batuman recalls an academic conference on the enigmatic writer Isaac Babel. In wry scenes, Batuman recalls misplacing Babel's last living relatives at the San Francisco airport; enduring a confounding car ride afterward, during which Babel's relatives interrogate her about the Tigger toy that dangles from her rearview mirror; uncovering Babel's secret influence on the making of *King Kong*; and finding herself in the cross fire of a translation skirmish. In other chapters, she travels to Tolstoy's ancestral estate, retraces Pushkin's wanderings in the Caucasus, learns about the finer points of the Old Uzbek language (which has one hundred words for crying), and traverses the equally colorful terrain of the writers' minds. As Batuman navigates her ancestry, her love life, and the thorny politics of grad school, **The Possessed** emerges as a brilliant meditation on the storytelling that propels our imaginations --- and stokes our realities.

Whether you read **The Possessed** with your book club, with your thesis adviser, or in solitude, this guide is designed to enhance the journey.

Discussion Guide

1. In his review of **The Possessed** for *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner called the book "crucially and

fundamentally... an examination of this question: How do we bring our lives closer to our favorite books?? To what extent have you brought your life closer to your favorite books? How did Elif Batuman's literary obsessions bring her closer to her own identity?

2. How has Russia's eccentric history --- marked by equal measures of extravagance and brutality --- shaped its storytelling style? In what ways is fiction better than journalism for capturing history? What stranger-than-fiction aspects of Russian history did you discover by reading *The Possessed*?

3. *Is Babel in California?* lets all readers vicariously experience not only the Babel conference and exhibition but also the tragicomedies of organizing the event. As Batuman delved into archival research, examined Babel's mug shots, and met his survivors, what image of Isaac Babel emerged? Who had the more accurate knowledge of the author, his family or the scholars who had devoted their careers to him?

4. **The Possessed** begins with a plot summary of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and its portrayal of intoxicating love. Discuss the various types of love explored in Batuman's essays and in the fiction she analyzes. How does her love for Eric change? What stoked the passion of Bolshevik revolutionaries? How did Batuman manage her love affair with academia (with which she broke up on more than one occasion)?

5. Which passages made you laugh out loud? How does the author's sense of the absurd mirror the absurdity in much of her beloved literature? How is she able to seamlessly blend the ridiculous with the sophisticated?

6. How does Batuman's expertise in linguistics affect the way she reads fiction in translation? How does it affect her 'reading' of the people she meets at home and abroad while pursuing her research? How does your own use of language reflect your sense of self?

7. Discuss Batuman's travels in Europe outside Russia. What does she discover about national identity during her encounters in Turkey (in the capital, Ankara, where she stayed in her grandmother's apartment), Uzbekistan, and other neighboring countries? What did national identity mean to the Russian authors who immersed themselves in the world outside their homeland (Dostoevsky's life in Italy, Pushkin's affinity for France, Turgenev's years in Baden-Baden)?

8. Batuman offers a bleak depiction of America's creative writing scene, rejecting an opportunity to join a creative writing program on Cape Cod. In your opinion, what is the impact of America's many MFA programs on contemporary fiction? How do these programs compare to the societies that produced such authors as Chekhov (a descendant of serfs) and Tolstoy (an aristocrat)?

9. Would your perception of Tolstoy's work change if you knew that he had been murdered?

10. What does **The Possessed** say about the differences between communities of writers, scholars, critics, and translators? Do you share Tolstoy's criticism of Chekhov's work and his dislike for *The Brothers Karamazov*? Do you share Batuman's boredom with the novels of the Turkish Nobel Prize-winning novelist Orhan Pamuk?

11. What aspects of Russian history are summarized in Empress Anna's ghoulish House of Ice? Why has it inspired so many creative works, in the visual arts as well as in literature?

12. If **The Possessed** were a novel, what would you say about the protagonist? How do the essays form one narrative about a young woman's transformation? What does she learn about Jewish alienation, writing, grad school, and ancestry? What does she learn from the minor characters, such as Matej, her friend who ends up becoming a monk in the book's closing scenes?

13. Batuman's introduction includes the observation, inspired by Michel Foucault, that Don Quixote "had broken the binary of life and literature. He had lived life and read books; he lived life through books, generating an even better book" (page 17). Near the end, Batuman applies René Girard's theory of mimetic desire: the notion that our identity is shaped by our desire to be other people, not simply to have what they have. How do these philosophies serve to bring the essays full circle? How are the threads of identity and literature woven throughout *The Possessed*?

14. How did **The Possessed** change the way you feel about the word "Caucasian"?

15. Batuman tells us that **The Possessed** takes its title from the Dostoevsky novel alternately titled, in translation, *The Demons*. In turn, the novel took its title from a biblical narrative in which demons leave a man whom they have possessed and enter a herd of swine. Are any of the scholars and authors featured in Batuman's book purged of their demons?

Author Bio

A self-described "6-foot-tall first-generation Turkish woman," Elif Batuman was born in New York City and grew up in New Jersey. Her essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The London Review of Books*, and other publications. Now living in San Francisco, she is the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award and teaches at Stanford University. Visit her web site, <http://us.macmillan.com/thepossessed>.

Critical Praise

"Batuman writes with superb wit... There's something melancholy, as well as beautiful, in using literature not just to illuminate experience but actually to create it. Batuman's writing waltzes in a space in which books and life reflect each other... If Susan Sontag had coupled with Buster Keaton, their prodigiously gifted love child might have written this book."

The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them

by Elif Batuman

Publication Date: February 16, 2010

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

ISBN-10: 0374532184

ISBN-13: 9780374532185