



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

Elif Batuman

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The Possessed: Adventures With Russian Books and the People Who Read Them Elif Batuman
**THE TRUE BUT UNLIKELY STORIES OF LIVES DEVOTED—ABSURDLY!
MELANCHOLICALLY! BEAUTIFULLY!—TO THE RUSSIAN CLASSICS**

No one who read Elif Batuman's first article (in the journal *n+1*) will ever forget it. "Babel in California" told the true story of various human destinies intersecting at Stanford University during a conference about the enigmatic writer Isaac Babel. Over the course of several pages, Batuman managed to misplace Babel's last living relatives at the San Francisco airport, uncover Babel's secret influence on the making of *King Kong*, and introduce her readers to a new voice that was unpredictable, comic, humane, ironic, charming, poignant, and completely, unpretentiously full of love for literature.

Batuman's subsequent pieces—for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and the *London Review of Books*—have made her one of the most sought-after and admired writers of her generation, and its best traveling companion. In *The Possessed* we watch her investigate a possible murder at Tolstoy's ancestral estate. We go with her to Stanford, Switzerland, and St. Petersburg; retrace Pushkin's wanderings in the Caucasus; learn why Old Uzbek has one hundred different words for crying; and see an eighteenth-century ice palace reconstructed on the Neva.

Love and the novel, the individual in history, the existential plight of the graduate student: all find their place in *The Possessed*. Literally and metaphorically following the footsteps of her favorite authors, Batuman searches for the answers to the big questions in the details of lived experience, combining fresh readings of the great Russians, from Pushkin to Platonov, with the sad and funny stories of the lives they continue to influence—including her own.

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

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Janet says

Read like wildfire, though personally I could have used more, more Russian books--and a bit less random student adventures--the Samarkhand stuff got too long for me. The last essay, I think, the Possessed, was the best. She's got a great way with turn of phrase, very funny, wonderful sense of characterization, and especially the spot-on Russians. Would have loved that mind turned even more to the literature itself. Looking forward to reading her academic work, even hoping she'll someday do something similar to Nabokov's Lectures on Russian Literature. She's inspiring me to investigate more rigorous literary criticism. The problems of really good writing are different than the problems of mediocre work. It's a case of wanting MORE of what they do BEST.

Jan-Maat says

I laughed reading this book. I read it in bed, I read in an armchair, I read it standing up in the kitchen, I read it standing up in the hallway, I read it in the garden on a mildly wobbly bench which I may never finish repairing, who knows, and in most of those places I laughed, apart from the hallway. The hallway is intrinsically lacking in humour, it is not it's fault and perhaps other hallways are quite funny I wouldn't like to make sweeping assumptions about the places where other people live.

Ah there was a point in time, yesterday afternoon as it happens - when it was quite clear to me what this book is and how to explain it, but this is a different point in time and so different and less clear cuts explanations suggest themselves. Yeah, yesterday even the bit about Tsarina Anna's Ice Palace in St.Petersburg and how she forced two of her courtiers to marry and spend their wedding night in said Ice Palace (where they didn't quite freeze to death), even that I could see how it related to the whole, today not so so much.

To muddle things up and maybe confuse you at one point in this book she, Mam'selle Batuman discusses conversion literature, specifically St. Augustine's confessions and other books which draw upon it and how structurally it is in two parts, this then mirrors the author's own life at first he is a ragamuffin and the first half of the confessions is lively and interesting and autobiographical, then he accepts that God had always found him and abruptly the second half is Biblical exegesis tied together with his own psychology. Essentially this book is the first half of Batuman's life, she sums it up so she can draw a line under it and embark on the second part of her life - which is as a novelist (presumably). Indeed she tells us that she long wanted to be a novelist but (a) felt that studying creative writing was a bad way of getting to be the kind of fiction writer that she admired - too conscious of the craft, too artisanal, lacking the casual brilliance of Tolstoy or Chekhov and (b) that studying literature would also take her further away from her goal because great literature (she felt) comes from life out from books therefore she starts studying linguistics. However what we realise is that she comes to understand is that life makes for poor literature it is absurd, it is disorganised, meaningless, and it's plotting and character development is appalling. Or to put it another way as a girl or a very young woman, one summer she has an intense experience in Turkey with an older man - she reads Anna Karenina, and as per the title she is possessed, late in her post graduate career she introduces us to Rene Girard and the idea of memesis, Girard indeed infects all of her contemporaries until they are all

driven mad and one must go to become a monk in Croatia as scapegoat for the rest, who otherwise like the Gadarene swine would have been driven over the edge of a cliff(view spoiler) . However we also understand, thanks to memesis, that Elif Batuman wanted to be Lev Tolstoy, well not so that she started taking hormones and grew a magnificent beard (view spoiler), but that he was her role model as a novelist, and therefore this book draws a line under the yearning, now she demonstrates to herself and us that Elif will be Elif the novelist, not an imitator, she will transcend and transform her possession. The other idea she is obsessed by is double entry book keeping - but again ideally there to the two parts balance the debit is balanced out by the credit, Elif wants to be the writer of *Anna Karenina* must be balanced out by Elif the writer of something that is not *Anna Karenina*. Well that is what I thought anyway, she however, takes 290 pages to say that and not one over long paragraph. Also she is funnier. And I laughed more.

Phew, well you might be reasonably thinking that all that doesn't sound like much fun, not exactly the one laugh every 4.6 pages that I otherwise claim it to be. True, well alternatively this is the story of a six foot US woman with Turkish parents blundering about as a post-graduate who has absurd experiences in Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Central Asia, and obviously the USA (view spoiler). Some of the absurdity comes about because as I mentioned at a vulnerable time in her life she read *Anna Karenina* and worse discussed it with her mother, the two of them then devise a very stupid theory of life and love (view spoiler) namely that Vronsky really loves women, but Levin doesn't, therefore Tolstoy is saying that a woman is better off with a man who doesn't really love women, and equally a man who behaves in a particularly foolish way obviously really loves women - perhaps you can sense how this might cause one or two complications in Batuman's love life, which indeed it does, reminding us that memesis is dangerous (view spoiler). But also amusing to the disinterested onlooker - it leads to her becoming the judge in a competition of the finest Hungarian teenage boy's leg at some kind of children's holiday camp in Hungary and to an Uzbek gardener explaining the facts of life (view spoiler) to her not-husband with whom he shares no common language (Batuman does not conceive, so I suppose it worked out for the best in the end).

Equally she is by citizenship of the USA and since I'm not it means as a foreigner I get to laugh at her weird USA behaviours and ways of seeing the world (view spoiler). On one occasion these bite her in the backside as when she takes a plane to Russia to attend a conference in Yasnaya Polyana (Tolstoy's manor house - now a museum), her luggage is lost and she attends the conference in typical casual USA flying clothes, luckily however since this is a Tolstoy conference since those clothes are so casual, many participants assume she's some kind of Tolstoyian, which of course she is (view spoiler).

Anyway, looking up at my typing I feel like the used car salesman who said 'well, it's got no wheels, and no engine, but the bodywork is not completely rusted through'. Literary theory, post graduate studies, mis-adventures in love, fat or simply bleak Russian novels, learning Uzbek in Samarkand(view spoiler), it doesn't sound like a recipe for a barrel of laughs, but it worked for me.

Caution: judging by the synopsis, Batuman's novel *The Idiot* sounds to me like a fictionalised version of this book (but possibly with less literary theory).

Zuberino says

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PS: Batuman's broadside against the MFA aqui
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n18/elif-bat...>

Daisy says

Instructive, illuminating, intelligent, funny, accessible.

In places, it both romanticizes and demystifies the life of a modern intellectual. She'll reference Dostoevsky and Safeway supermarkets in the same paragraph, or Tolstoy conferences and shampoo.

She stays true to her intention of exploring how to bring your life closer to your favorite books. This is readable and charming. As time goes by I probably won't remember the literary details as I will the descriptions of Samarkand, Stanford, St. Petersburg. But I'm very glad to have found and read this.

Rod says

Some reviewers seem not to like this, claiming that the author is "unlikable" and "shallow." How anyone can make either of these claims having read this book is quite beyond me. Elif Batuman seems almost irresistibly charming, and shallow is definitely not the word for her. Regardless of her interpretations of the works at hand (and I can't claim to have read much past the obvious Tolstoy and Dostoevsky classics), her writing about those works and authors is tremendously impressive, her descriptions of adventures in far flung literary corners are hilarious, and her recounting of some of the absurdities of graduate school resonate (even if my own experience was more humdrum, it was honestly no less absurd).

Really, if you're going to criticize this book because the cover art by Roz Chast led you to think you were going to get something different than what you ended up getting, then there's probably not much help for you.

This is great fun, at the same time that it's really quite serious. That's a rare combination these days. And it made me want to read Russian literature. There's almost nothing that can do that.

Max Nemtsov says

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David says

There are flashes of charm in this book, counterbalanced by some very tedious patches indeed. Elif Batuman is apparently well-connected enough to have Roz Chast do the artwork for the book cover. She also seems to have a remarkable talent for self-promotion. This book has generated a considerable amount of buzz, and some near-hagiographic reviews.

I don't quite understand why. If one wanted to view things uncharitably, Ms Batuman spent seven somewhat aimless years as a graduate student in comparative literature at Stanford without ever really figuring out why she was there. She did prove quite adept at ferreting out travel grant money, which she used to make various trips to Russia and other former Soviet republics. This book is essentially a travel memoir - the record of those trips. Like most travel memoirs, it is interesting only in spots. Two of the book's seven chapters are quite well-written and manage to sustain the reader's interest (the author's attendance at a conference about Tolstoy held at the Tolstoy estate, a trip to Saint Petersburg to visit a reconstruction of an ice palace first built in the reign of Catherine the great).

But that's as good as it gets. Ms Batuman once spent a dismal summer visiting Samarkand. Inexplicably, she insists on telling us all about it. In excruciating detail, spread over three chapters. It takes up almost half of the book and is indescribably tedious. As a general rule, other people's travel memoirs are most interesting when things go wrong, but Ms Batuman's account of her summer in Samarkand almost made me stick pencils in my eyes, just to make it stop. Fortunately, the Kindle has an off switch. Two other chapters, the author's ruminations on Dostoyevsky prompted by a trip to Venice and an account of a conference devoted to Isaac Babel that she helped organize at Stanford, were readable, but not particularly interesting. Ms Batuman, or her editor, should have realized that departmental gossip, though it might be catnip for graduate students, is of almost no interest to anyone else.

One point needs to be addressed. Elif Batuman does not want you to think of this book as just a collection of travel pieces. Seven years in graduate school have apparently given her higher aspirations. So she places this really bizarre section at the end of her introductory chapter, in which she essentially seems to be claiming profundity by association. This kind of thing:

*What if you read "Lost Illusions" and ... you went to Balzac's house and Madame Hanska's estate, read every word he ever wrote, dug up every last thing you could about him - and **then** started writing? That is the idea behind this book.*

Say what now? Is Ms Batuman suggesting that simply attending a conference on Tolstoy held at the Tolstoy estate will provide deep insight into his work, or magically improve the quality of one's writing about Tolstoy? This seems charmingly naive, not to say stupid. Or is she just trying to assign some kind of retrospective meaning to her seven years at graduate school?

At any rate, the book is studded throughout with Batuman's assorted drive-by thoughts about various authors, most of them Russian. These are largely innocuous, with the exception of her "analysis" of Dostoyevsky's "The Possessed", which is an embarrassment from start to finish. A plodding, blow-by-blow summary that stretches for pages, is followed by a summary of what her Stanford professor told the class about it, leading in to her infatuation with charismatic classmate Matej, a smouldering Croatian cliché straight from central casting whose "narrow glinting eyes and high cheekbones" cause her to lose control altogether:

"a long-limbed, perfectly proportioned physical elegance, such that his body always looked at once extravagantly casual and flawlessly composed".

Matej alternates between smoldering and brooding, reducing his classmates (male and female) to a state of drooling concupiscence, eventually triggering some kind of epiphanic advance in Batuman's understanding of "The Possessed" (was the trigger his two-pack-a-day habit, the discovery that his great-uncle was a cardinal, or just the shock of finally landing him in bed?) It's to Batuman's credit that her discussion of "The Possessed" avoids the usual mind-numbing academic jargon -- an unfortunate side effect is that its utter banality becomes impossible to conceal.

I cannot agree with those more enthusiastic reviewers who suggest that Batuman offers particularly keen insights. She clearly enjoys reading, but is not especially adept at engaging the reader's enthusiasm. Unless you have a particular interest in obscure Uzbek poets, or the tedium of life in the former Soviet Union, this much-hyped book is likely to disappoint you.

La Petite Américaine says

I enjoyed this book immensely. I actually want to reread it. It's one of those books where the author just assumes you speak French and understand what the hell she's talking about when she fires out comparative lit terminology using a vocabulary that requires a dictionary for the rest of us to comprehend. Either she's a brilliant intellectual or has just been in grad school too long. Probably both.

She gives vivid accounts of Tolstoy's last hours, she retells the horrific story of the demented Czarina Anna Ivanovna's ice palace in chilling detail, and she takes us through the ins and outs of Uzbek literature. The people she meets along the way, from a weak-boweled Czech to her crazy department colleagues and Babel's wife, among others, make for an exciting and unique read.

I also love that she had balls to do the things I never could. Studying for a semester in Prague in 2001 was about as ghetto as I could get. This girl made her life about studying not only Russian, but the complex bodies of Russian literature in the original language. She went to Uzbekistan for a summer. She flew Aeroflot, for Chrissakes. I dig it. A lot.

There were, of course, a couple things that went wrong for me. One was the author's overwhelming "frugality" that remarkably clashed with every enjoyable part of the book. She chooses her graduate program

based on who will give her the most money. Fine, not too uncommon. But then she does everything she can to get grants to study abroad in college and grad school while the rest of us suckers pay our tuition. She can't just go home and work at Starbucks for summer breaks, no, she has to get the Time Out travel series to pay her way to write about Turkey for three months. Which is fine, again, although she doesn't even seem to enjoy her free ride. Then, it gets worse. She repeatedly seems to think of frivolous study topics in grad school in order to receive grant money to go to Russia. Paying a cent of her own towards her own goals is just not in the picture. Then, in Uzbekistan her host mother hides the good food and serves her meals full of insects. Heh. Did you ever think of going to the local supermarket and buying some of your own food? You're wealthy by the standards of this country, why don't you stop bitching about your "cheap" host mom and go buy your own food? Can't you spend just one dime of your own?? Later, she learns that her teachers in Uzbekistan are making about \$100 for three months of one-on-one lessons with her, and although she insists that a couple of hundred dollars left over from her overpaid tuition go to those very teachers, she never follows up to make sure it happens. But whatever. My personal favorite is when Aerfolot loses her luggage and the result is that she has no clothes or shampoo and is in a hotel with no gift shop. She ends up asking a Russian woman in the hotel for shampoo, who gives her the very last of her own. Now REALLY. Come on! Are you telling me that when you understood you'd be leaving the airport without your luggage that you didn't think to stop for a second and buy the essentials that you'd need? Are you telling me that there was NO store in town where you might (God forbid) spend a dollar to get your own goddamn shampoo?? And then, of course, you ask some poor Russian lady who gets paid in Rubles when you could have asked one of your American colleagues for the same thing?? Gaaaahd!! You cheap, cheap, cheap woman.

It goes further astray for me when, in the final chapters of the book, she has too much to drink and ends up in bed with a classmate. She later tries to intellectualize the fact that he doesn't love her, as if making some sort of scholarly argument will explain why this happened. Really, Elif, it's not that complex. The kid was a manic-depressive sociopath from a rich family. The fact that he charms everyone around him, doesn't know what he wants to do with his life and ends up being a monk in Europe isn't mysterious, heart-wrenching, or even original. It's a massive cliché and everyone who went to college knows a similar person with a similar story, I guarantee it.

Then follows the odd break-up of her grad school class when they eventually have to separate, graduate, and go out and face the real world. Elif seems shocked that they don't stay a close-knit group as they go about their lives off of the Stanford campus bubble, having kids, paying mortgages, etc. Welcome to the real world, sweetie.

If it doesn't work out, she can always go back to school. It's full of people like her: brilliant academics with no street-smarts who can't even figure out how to get a bottle of shampoo in a foreign country. Thank God for universities...people like Elif and her friends couldn't get jobs mixing concrete.

Julie Ehlers says

That *The Possessed* got published at all is somewhat bewildering. What *is* this book, anyway? Its subtitle claims it's about "Russian books and the people who read them," but that's not entirely accurate. It's really Batuman's memoir of her time in grad school at Stanford: her interactions with professors and fellow students, her time at a Tolstoy conference at Tolstoy's old estate, a trip to the recreated "ice palace" in St.

Petersburg, and her summer spent in Uzbekistan attempting to learn about Uzbek language and literature. Scattered throughout are historical summaries and explications of various texts from what we in the U.S. would call Eastern Europe, some quite well known (e.g., works by Babel and Dostoevsky), some highly obscure.

The Possessed is broken up into long essays, and the fact is that some of it doesn't hang together as well as I would like it to. Ordinarily this would be quite frustrating for me, but in this case three things worked in the book's favor. First, I was really interested in the subject matter, one that I know little about. Second, and more importantly, Batuman has a fantastic dry sense of humor that weaves its way throughout the book; you can tell it's not so much that she's *trying* to be funny as that she's just a really funny person and it can't help but show. Her distinctive voice is one of the things that holds the memoir together, and that's a rare and impressive thing in a first book. Finally, I admired the book's ambition. Batuman has a lot to say and covers a lot of ground; she has a weird and complicated mind but does an admirable job of portraying it. Reading *The Possessed* was like hanging out with a really smart and hilarious person who has completely different preoccupations from my own and sees the world in a singular way. How can that be anything but fascinating?

Michael says

Taken from the articles found in journals like *n+1*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and the *London Review of Books*, Elif Batuman combines them into this memoir. *The Possessed* may be a collection of journal articles, but combined together it forms more of a memoir of Batuman's academic life. Starting with a conference she was involved with at Stanford University about Isaac Babel in the first article "Babel in California".

I mention the first article "Babel in California" because I think it represented everything I did not like about this book. On the surface this book sounds right up my alley. The misleading subtitle for this book is "Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them" and that is the expectation I had when going into this book. However going by the first article about one conference, I got a very padded book with no real structure. It seems like Elif Batuman has edited her articles in a way to fit into a book, but she turned articles into sixty page chapters that are so drawn out that it is boring.

There are some interesting sections within this book but I feel the major problem is this book has no structure. If this was a collection of essays, I would expect a theme. If this was a memoir, I would expect more focus on her life. *The Possessed* sits somewhere in the middle, each chapter is very different; about a conference, her travels, her studies or just reading Russian lit. Each chapter does not seem to connect to the previous chapter, which just made it too clunky.

I wanted a book about Russian literature, but *The Possessed* did not give me that. In fact any literary criticism was never explained properly, so made it hard to understand how she drew her conclusions. I am looking for a good book about Russian literature, like a literary exploration or a journey into these books. If you know of a book like this that you would recommend, please let me know.

This book originally appeared on my blog; <http://www.knowledgelost.org/book-rev...>

RandomAnthony says

Elif Batuman's *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* emerged, in my imagination, through conversations of this nature:

Elif: I'm writing an article about the weird academicians who showed up for the Babel conference.

Elif's friend/colleague (EFC): You should turn that into a book.

Elif: There's not enough material for a book.

EFC: So? Just make it longer. Add your weird trips to all those countries that used to be part of Russia but aren't anymore.

Elif: What would be the point of said book? Why would someone buy it?

EFC: Because the same people who listen to NPR eat that crap up, and they 1) buy books, and 2) feel smart when they read the type of book you'll write. You need a point? Ok, write about whether or not studying obscure literature is worthwhile. Add some of your dissertation. It's still on your hard drive, right?

Elif: I'll think about it.

The Possessed is lukewarm. It reads like a loosely-connected collection of articles grafted together around the author's grad school experiences. The first section, focusing on the socially inept Babel enthusiasts (I had never heard of Babel before), is probably the best. The chapters concerning Batuman's European visits are pointless; she sounds as if she's telling exotic, overlong dinner party stories. The ending chapters, in which Batuman builds the case for studying literature, are a bit better, but the bulk of her argument could probably be summarized in a few magazine pages. I don't blame Batuman for cashing in; hell, anyone who writes a dissertation (and I get the sense Batuman took the "publish as much as you can from your dissertation" mantra to heart) fantasizes about readers, you know, actually giving a shit about the content. But *The Possessed* totters between academic analysis and breezy memoir, serving neither in the process. I'm surprised an intelligent person wrote such an incohesive book. Batuman, I assume, perceives the connections between the personal narrative and the long passages about mostly obscure eastern European literature, but she needs to understand that readers are not in her head. She also seems subtly to portray her graduate school experiences as trying and noble. The back cover describes the text as addressing "the existential plight of the graduate student." Holy fuck. I would much rather study Russian literature, however difficult, than pull five shifts a week at an interstate Hardee's. Grad school isn't a "plight" compared to, well, just about any other job in existence. Ms. Batuman also compares her social circle's fascination with one magnetic personality to delving intensely into literature, but she comes off more like she's bragging that she kissed the cute boy in class than saying anything all that thought-provoking. I don't know. The theorists' expounding on why people need literature, and the forms of novels, are interesting, I guess, but lack validation and whiff of horsepoop without the addition of more formal psychological and/or neuro-psychological insight. I agree the deep scrutiny of novels is a worthwhile endeavor. I just don't think *The Possessed* defends that assertion as well as it could. Two stars, don't fall for the cover art or chatty blurbs.

eb says

I love this book, and I'm not sure I've read anything quite like it before. Batuman is a comp lit PhD, and in *The Possessed*, she blends her academician's knowledge and critical vocabulary with dryly hilarious stories about herself and her experiences reading and studying Tolstoy, Chekhov, and the other Russian greats. Batuman's voice is unique, which is one of those claims you encounter on every book jacket ever printed, but hers really is. She's funny, compassionate, observant, plainspoken, and brilliant. She's fascinated by the world and by Russian writers, and she has a genius for explicating both with kindness and sparkle. Her first book produces the same effect as a Chekhov story: it comforts the reader with the assurance that s/he is not alone in the world, that there are other people who see things the same way s/he does.

Josh says

A book I wish I'd written - but then doesn't saying that show that I've missed the deeper lesson of *The Possessed*, meaning the lesson of all fairy tales, which as Joseph Campbell put it goes something like "Where you stumble, there is your treasure"? Well then, let's try it again. Elif Batuman is a romantic soul and a romantic soul can fall in love with anything; so her book - which explores, at least as well as Huey Lewis or Drew Barrymore, the unlikely, overwhelming and occasionally creepy *Power of Love* - reminds us either a) that the person we're looking for isn't "out there" at all, or b) that the person we're looking for is everywhere, under every tea cosy and sofa cushion. In this way she proves herself a great reader of Russian literature, which remedied its status as the uncoolest kid at the international table by shouting loudly that it didn't care where anyone else was sitting, it was going to do its own thing. Did it really mean that? (wonderful sentence) Yes...and no. But it believed in the inherent interestingness of both itself and the world. Less Sontag than Paglia and less Paglia (thank god) than V.S. Pritchett, the lovable, prickly, hilarious Ms. Batuman seems to believe the same. All hail dame Elif.

Darwin8u says

"...you see, but you do not observe! For all your scientific enlightenment, you always misread the signs."
- Elif Batuman

I first became aware of Elif Batuman's book almost seven years ago when I saw it suddenly appear (mistakenly?) next to Tolstoy on the Fiction shelf at B&N. A few years later at another bookstore I saw it shelved next to Dostoevsky. At first I was a bit irritated. I figured it was a bit of shelving incompetence. What kind of people were these bookstores hiring these days? Later, however, I softened. I actually began to feel this was a form of NINJA (Sambo?) marketing. Perhaps, it wasn't accidentally placed there. Who actually peruses Literary Criticism/Literary Memoir sections these days? Perhaps, the placement in the Fiction section next to BIG Russian authors wasn't a mistake after all. It actually jammed the book into my craw; dropped it into my radar.

How to describe the book? It isn't exactly a memoir and isn't exactly literary criticism. It reads like a hyper-caFFEINATED, precocious literary/travel diary for an introspective writer/academic fascinated by the granular context surrounding Russian novels. Batuman isn't just interested in the text. She wants to shoot Chekhov's

gun and lay on some train tracks in St. Petersburg. She wants the genealogy and the genetic profile of these novels and stories. Toward the end of her academic career (and her book) it isn't just fetish items and places she is obsessed with. She isn't just finding the context and the clues surrounding Russian novels, the novels have become part of her life. Her last essays seem to reflect the power of Russian novels to invade the cold spaces in our brain, break the chains of reality, bleed into our relationships, our dreams, our motives.

For the most part, I dug this book. The center essays were a bit uneven, however. So, I can't claim this is close to a perfect book. But it is unique, fascinating, and well-written. Batuman has a way with prose. As a 6 foot tall, Turkish woman, her perspective on everything is biologically unique, but it is her talent at writing that makes this book, this precocious journal, this love story to Russian lit worth the time and cost.

Ed says

A collection of essays on Russian literature that is both funny and learned by an academic who writes very well. Excellent short discussion of *Anna Karenina*, *The Possessed* (hence the title although it is also about those who get possessed by Russian literature and by the study of language as language) and Isaac Babel with a side trip to Samarkand which seems to have become one of the least romantic and dreariest places on the old Silk Road.

Her description of academic conferences in St. Petersburg and Berkley are both high and low points of the book. High points because they are funny as hell, low because almost everyone at both places seem ridiculous. The Babel meeting in California is full of absurdities--the Hoover Institution is co-sponsoring it and they would really like to have some three dimensional objects as part of the show--a fake fur hat that looks like something a Russian would wear or a Cossack costume that was probably picked up at a Halloween shop going out of business sale.

Recommended.

Silvia says

UNEVEN is the best word to describe this book. After the stellar review in the NYT and the hype around it (sold out in some bookstores), I expected "The Possessed" to be, well, much more than what it is. That's the danger with great reviews, I guess..

Elif Batuman is a preternaturally gifted writer, very funny, amazingly knowledgeable and wise for her age (is she thirty yet??), but some of her essays are more patch-up work than accomplished pieces. Especially the Summer in Samarkand ones. As she relates, in three different installments, the "end of her youth" in Uzbekistan, she shuffles between her own experience of the place, and of the people, and a sort of catch-up course in Uzbek literature that seems to come straight out of notes scribbled down quickly in her notebook during that summer. Maybe that worked when the essay was published as a separate piece (although I doubt that, given its length). But as part of a collection of essays, what keeps these stories together is Elif's fun and smart personality, her encounters with people, her amazing eye for human weaknesses, and her ability to connect strange literary theories to her life. Every time the book swerves from that, the writing -and the pleasure of reading- suffer.

I still wish there were more people like Elif Batuman writing in the world, in any case. But I wish her editor had done a better job at helping her shape up this material for the book.

Melanie says

I've known people like Elif Batuman--brilliant people who can't reply to the question "How are you today?" without a.) quoting literature, and then b.) quoting some obscure but relevant work of critical theory (and then maybe c.) adding an interesting bit of historical trivia, just for fun). It can take awhile to realize that, for this kind of person, *that is actually how they feel*--they've answered your question, you just might have to work a little harder to translate it into an "I'm fine" or an "I've been better." *The Possessed* is a book by, about, and for this kind of person, and for those of us who enjoy following them down their twisty, sometimes obsessive, often wise and utterly delightful paths. (I also feel like Batuman wins bonus points for making me want to re-read Pushkin--I didn't think that could happen, but This Kind of Person *is* notoriously persuasive...)

Alec Scott says

A lovely wit infuses this book, but she gets sidetracked. Initially she writes (beautifully) about her reaction to the great Russian writers -- and that's what the title promises the book will be about. But then she starts to tell us, detail for detail, about her rather hapless study journeys to Russia, and the whole thing become a bagatelle -- slightly amusing but insignificant. Still, she's great at thumbnail sketches of people -- as witness: "Cowper, best remembered as the author of the hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" was literally driven mad in 1763 by his anxiety over the entrance examination for a Clerkship of Journals in the House of Lords. After three suicide attempts, he wound up in an asylum where he began writing poetry, his most famous is called "Hatred and Vengeance, my eternal portion." A friend, Lady Austen, trying to steer him to more neutral topics, asked him to write a blank-verse people about "this sofa" ..." And she loves and quotes Henry James which always gets points with me: from Portrait of a Lady: "Afterwards, however, she always remembered that one should never regret a generous error."

A.

El says

I've been wanting to read this one for a while, since it was blurbed (I think) in the NY Times or on NPR or on Slate.com - or all of the above. As someone who reads Russian books (and enjoys them!) and is interested in Russian cultural studies, I thought this book was written for me. I didn't understand the title at first - shouldn't it read *The Possessed El: This One is for You*? But I got over that and then began to wonder, "Who *are* these other, alleged, 'People Who Read Them'? I want names!"

Turns out that's not quite what this book is about either. The title is sort of misleading. The Adventures of Batuman's book are not the adventures of Russianophiles as I expected. No, the Adventures were solely Batuman's. But she did have Adventures, so that was pretty cool. It wasn't like she was just an armchair traveler who decided to write a book about being an armchair traveler. She actually went places. Annoyingly (as in "Oh-that-bitch"), Batuman seemed always to have someone willing to send her places. Graduate studies programs, *The New Yorker* (yeah, okay, fine, she wrote for them..., but still!), etc. If I had those people in my corner I'd probably be doing a lot more traveling too. But no, my traveling comes after lots of

aggravation, lots of belt-tightening, *lots* of saving. And then coming home to an empty cache again. Yeah, I'm bitter. But that's okay. My Adventures are not her Adventures.

So this book is sort of like a travel memoir, and not quite as much as "Russian appreciation" as it states inside. Batuman goes to a lot of really cool places, she bitches about things like all good American travelers do to maintain this arrogance that the rest of the world has come to know and love/hate, and then once in a while throws in some cool anecdote about a Russian author or a book. It's not at all what I expected. I wanted more talk of the Russian authors and books and less talky-talk from Batuman. I don't really care who she banged, or how her boyfriend got sick off of borscht; it's all sort of amusing but it's not what I wanted out of this book.

I expected some sort of insight into my own psyche as to why I adore Russian literature so much. I thought Batuman might use her own experiences to explain why she also likes Russian literature, but instead she spent a considerable amount of time talking about the Balzac she was reading. (Balzac was French, just in case anyone is confused.) The subtitle (*...and the People Who Read Them*) made me think that there were going to be a lot of insight drawn from Russianophiles, but there really wasn't. Or maybe I'm expecting too much from subtitles again. It's a bad habit, taking things at face value sometimes.

Still, it was a good read, and a nice addition to my Sunday Reading Plan. Just at 300 pages or so I was able to breeze through it in one sitting today. Batuman has a nice writing style (which is probably why she has published in *The New Yorker*), very accessible and fun to read. I just didn't expect what I got, which isn't Batuman's fault necessarily, but I still don't feel the title matches the text. Especially since the text is overwhelmingly American. (And not the good kind of American, btw. This is the kind that makes other countries point and laugh.)

Anna says

I'm inclined to classify 'The Possessed' with Underfoot in Show Business and You Must Go and Win: Essays as 'very funny and clever anecdotal autobiographies of the professional and personal lives of women who I'd like to be friends with'. This one has the added advantage of being concerned with postgraduate life, although PhDs in the US are very different to those in the UK. As I understand it, across the pond they take longer, involve exams and compulsory teaching, and constitute more of an academic apprenticeship. In the UK you're lucky to get more than three years of funding, teaching experience is ad hoc, and you're basically undertaking an independent spirit quest of some sort. (I refer to the social sciences and humanities here; in the sciences you get to be in a lab.) Anyway, Batuman recounts strange tales of her PhD in literature, involving much travel and many encounters with odd people, not all of whom were academics. I found the whole thing very entertaining, as she has an eye (ear?) for absurdity and tells historical and literary anecdotes very well. Her writing style is amusing throughout. To pick a couple of random examples:

What did you know about Uzbekistan once you learned that Old Uzbek had a hundred different words for crying? I wasn't sure, but it didn't seem to bode well for my summer vacation.

When the Russian Academy of Sciences puts together an author's *Collected Works*, they aren't aiming for something you can put in a suitcase and run away with. The 'millennium' edition of Tolstoy fills a hundred volumes and weighs as much as a newborn beluga whale.

Highlights of the book include Batuman's attempt to get university funding on the basis of a theory that Tolstoy was murdered, an extremely awkward conference on Isaac Babel, and the strange tale of an ice house commissioned by Empress Anna Ioannovna. What a lovely compendium of historical and literary ephemera. It has definitely encouraged me to read more Russian literature.
