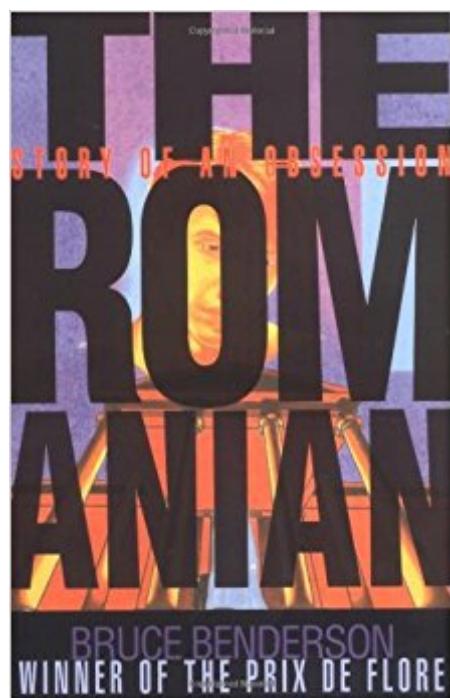


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The Romanian: Story Of An Obsession



Synopsis

Winner of the 2004 Prix de Flore; one of France's most distinguished literary prizes; a wildly romantic, true-life love story; History follows a trail of sputtering desire, often calling upon the delusions of lovers to generate the sparks. If it weren't for us, the world would suffer from a dismal lack of stories," writes Bruce Benderson in this brutally candid memoir. What astonishes and intrigues is Benderson's way of recounting, in the sweetest possible voice, things that are considered shocking, wrote *Le Monde*. What is so shocking? It's not just Benderson's job translating *Céline Dion's* saccharine autobiography, which he admits is driving him mad; but his unrequited love for an impoverished Romanian in cheap club-kid platforms with dollar signs in his squinting eyes, whom he meets while on a journalism assignment in Eastern Europe. Rather than retreat, Benderson absorbs everything he can about Romanian culture and discovers an uncanny similarity between his own obsession for the Romanian (named Romulus) and the disastrous love affair of King Carol II, the last king of Romania (1893-1953). Throughout, Benderson; absolutely free of bitterness, nastiness, or any desire to protect himself, wrote *Le Monde*; is sustained by little white codeine pills, a poetic self-awareness, a sense of humor, and an unwavering belief in the perfect romance, even as wild dogs chase him down Romanian streets.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Benderson was wandering Budapest researching sex clubs for *Nerve*. com when

he fell in love. Romulus, a Romanian street hustler, was a sleekly attractive, uneducated (though clever) 24-year old (significantly younger than Benderson), into soccer, TV and swapping dirty stories with his buddies. Living in a largely homophobic culture, Romulus didn't consider himself anything but heterosexual, even as he spent months having sex with Benderson. As Benderson (author of two novels, including *User*, as well as some nonfiction) slid into an obsession with Romulus, he started reading about Romanians whose lives and loves seemed curiously tangential: the artist Brancusi; the novelist Istrati; the lascivious King Carol II and his Jewish lover, Lupescu. Sometimes, Benderson and Romulus drove around the Romanian countryside, exploring villages mired between pastoral paganism and socialist realism. Weaving storytelling and seduction, Benderson's tale has a deliciously Arabian Nights flavor. His descriptions—the fat Ukrainian bartender with "fast, greedy fingers" and "predatory" hospitality—render scenes so three-dimensional, readers will be checking for their wallets. While some may be derailed by the unsafe sex and Benderson's back-to-the-closet erotics, anyone who's able to read a painfully honest account of an obsessive love affair without feeling they need to judge the author will be rewarded. This *Prix de Flore* winner could be Benderson's American breakthrough book. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"History, and my history, are part porn novels," declares Benderson halfway through this haunting memoir of his nine-month obsession with a deprived young street hustler from Romania. Enthralled by Romulus' soccer-defined legs and ill-fitting macho gestures as well as romanticized notions of barrier crossing with a poor Eastern European man who claims to be heterosexual, Benderson relishes the purity of homosexual sex that denies bourgeois notions of gayness even as his infatuation careens out of control. Romanian history and culture--especially the romantic gamble of the "playboy king," Carol II, and his Jewish lover, Lupescu, and sculptor Constantin Brancusi's modern abstractions--guide Benderson through the inscrutability of passion from the perspective of the beloved and other mysteries, the author's erotic energy bringing these subjects to life. As in his book-length essay, *Toward the New Degeneracy*, Benderson is fascinated with the sexual personae of the underclasses, but this time it's deeply personal, challenging the author to redefine his notions of love. Uncommonly prescient and provocative, the French edition made Benderson the first American to win the esteemed *Prix de Flore*. Brendan DriscollCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"The Romanian" by Bruce Benderson is an excellent book, better, I think, than the ponderous sex-at-a-distance "Death in Venice" by Thomas Mann. The subject matter is the same, however: a fully grown adult mature homosexual male, who has an out-of-control obsession with a much younger male. In "Death in Venice," the object of the obsession is virtually out-of-reach, and all the better because of it. In "Romanian" the target of the obsession is not only within-reach, but becomes an integral part (for a few months) in the life of the author. As in most love-pairings in real life and in fiction, one of the members of the dyad loves more than the other. In "Romanian" this fact is painfully present throughout the autobiographical novel, as middle-aged Bruce pursues an impossible love with mid-20s Romulus. Benderson's story (as Mann's) is all about the main character, an openly gay man (in real life and fiction) who brazenly and pitifully fixes and focuses his life on the unachievable conquest of the younger male. In neither book is there a satisfying union. But, is this not a predictable end that always results from the implausible and unattainable? Yes, there's a bit too much not-so-interesting history of the Romanian people, their tragic national story and their unfortunate history of weird royal rule. The author draws an apt parallel between his own life (especially his relationship with his mother) and that of the fateful Romanian Royal family of King Carol and his mistress (and his mother). Part of the genius of the book is in this uncanny though self-serving similarity and the lessons that the author draws thereby. Yes, the author obsessively goes into too much boring detail too much of the time, and the Romanian boy Romulus is a thoroughly despicable, pitiable, sad product of a society essentially gone bad. But that said, the story is filled with an engaging life philosophy, interesting author insight into the psychology of obsession and its necessary and bad decisions. Benderson's obsession with himself more-or-less reminded me of the old saying, "awareness is a bummer." On a side note, I am confused about a movie which seems to parallel in many ways the story line of "The Romanian." The movie's title is "Bulgarian Lovers." Yes, the main younger character is given Bulgarian nationality in the movie, and the main older character is a Spanish lawyer, not an American writer. But the movie's story line has many overlapping features with those in this book. Is there a meaningful parallel or is the similarity merely happenstance? Anyone know? I really hated the book's ending. The ending ruined the story. There was no satisfaction after having plowed my way through this sometimes excellent book to have it end with a "9-months later reunion" between Benderson and Romulus. Ugh and yuck. The very poor ending brought the book down to a rating of about 3.5, reduced to a 3 for its other excesses and overly detailed passages.

The unhealthy relationships in this memoir are given a philosophical gravity due to the author's deep

insights into his own obsessions. While if he were a friend I would want to slap him, few readers will not have lived through similar if less dramatic self destructive romances.

Benderson's personal portrayal of obsession has all-too-familiar touches. His writing is so graceful that the angst of it has an air of ease and acceptance. Even in the struggles of jealousy, his tone is muted and floats across his personal landscape with, perhaps, an ease enabled by his favorite drug. The floating sensation of that is familiar to me. The book is a genuine pleasure to read. And easy to pick up to read again once finished. The desperate love of those who are gay/queer for those who are not is not something that lends itself well to most writers. Benderson's honesty is plus, we can fall in love with this Romanian along with the author. So easily.

Not only did the author give the reader a glimpse into his personal story of obsessive love; but also the added problem of his obsession - the young man that he lusts after is much younger than him, more beautiful, and lives and hustles in Romania. There is a feeling for the reader, of impending doom throughout this book. Benderson's deep feelings of lust/love is made more difficult for him knowing this beautiful man will do anything for money - including sell his own body. So it begs the question throughout the book. Does this beautiful young man really like our older pursuer; or is he merely a means to an end. Romulus does what he wants, even when the author visits him every few months from the states....but Romulus always makes his body available and therein is our 'catch 22'. Benderson pulls no punches about the beautiful body of Romulus always there for him. Angst, frustration, anger and helplessness go hand in hand with Benderson as he tries to cope with his feelings of loving someone he can't control - and who has also made it plain to Benderson that he prefers women and is not gay. We are also given a parallel stories of obsessive love between Prince/King Carol I and his paramour a Jewess. THAT story ended badly. Benderson's story of his obsession, is also his total renunciation of his personal life, in order to satisfy his need, his lust, his compulsion for his beautiful boy. So we are kept wondering...will it work?....can it work?....It's worth the read to find out. Thank you to my Romanian friend, Anton, for recommending this book to me.

Allegedly a true story of a sexual obsession, but I wasn't buying into any truth. I believe the object of the author's affection was a composite character of maybe 3 or 4 rentboys. While the author banged out his travel articles, the lad watched TV....what did they talk about during their time together and at meals? Ultimately, the situ just isn't very interesting. Consider what Maugham did w Mildred in "Of Human Bondage." !

The Romanian is a multi-layered look behind at least two different curtains. One would be the mindset of an "old" literate homosexual regarding life in general and his cruising style and objectives in particular. This was of only moderate interest to me but might be a highlight for other readers. It really does open up the world of suppressed, pre-equal rights gay life. The second was an excellent look into Romania and the vestiges of the former Soviet Union in eastern Europe. Americans are often ignorant of the histories and cultures of the many smaller nations that were gobbled up by Soviet expansion. These countries have rich, centuries-long traditions and are different enough from our own experience to provide some startling contrasts while being similar enough to allow us to relate to their struggles, whether on a personal or national level. A good read, worth the time for its B+ writing and its A- look at history and personal relationships.

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