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## The idiot review elif batuman

In the Spring 2006 issue of n+1, Elif Batuman makes the case for what the novel should do. Reading the Best American Short Stories anthologies of 2004 and 2005, she writes that, almost without exception, the stories have been “pared down to a nearly unreadable core of brisk verbs and vivid nouns” that is “celebrated as ‘lean,’ ‘tight,’ ‘well-honed’ prose.” The novel, on the other hand, “consists of all the irrelevant garbage, the effort to redeem that garbage, to integrate it into Life Itself, to redraw the boundaries of Life Itself.” In 2017, with the publication of *The Idiot*, Batuman gives us a version of this novel. *The Idiot* incorporates a boundary-redrawing method of communication—email, that purveyor of garbage—into its structure. The novel opens in the fall of 1995, and email is present in its first sentence: “I didn’t know what email was until I got to college.” The narrator, like the author, is a Turkish-American woman who enrolls at Harvard. Selin is fascinated by language and takes courses in Russian, linguistics, and philosophy of language. She takes another class called *Constructed Worlds*; she enters and wins the undergraduate fiction contest. The medium of email meshes with each of these disciplines and with the exciting and overwhelming ideas Selin encounters. In the beginning Russian course, the narrator meets Ivan, an older Hungarian student of mathematics. They become partners in class, acting out scenarios from a grammar primer that form an embedded narrative. When Ivan and Selin strike up an increasingly intimate email correspondence, occasionally in Russian, their messages incorporate phrases from the primer, itself a love story. Ivan shares his name with the primer’s male protagonist. Emailing makes Selin feel as though she is “living two lives,” and she considers what would happen if she and Ivan “both had ghostwriters.” Their correspondence, like their relationship, builds with tantalizing slowness as a series of advances and reversals. In this way, the narrative resembles Batuman’s 2006 assertion of what literature needs: “Novels like *The Miner*, where you go into the mine and nothing happens; novels unlike *Germinal*, where you go into the mine and come out a socialist.” To say nothing happens in Batuman’s novel isn’t strictly accurate—Selin makes friends, takes walks, goes to class, thinks about Ivan, creates art, and grapples with newfound knowledge and received ideas—but a so-called satisfying narrative arc isn’t one of the work’s takeaways. In fact, the novel proceeds in a manner not unlike a “random walk,” a concept from math and physics that happens to be the subject of Ivan’s thesis. In addition to exhorting American writers to “write long novels, pointless novels,” Batuman also uses “botched” as a term of approval. She applies the adjective to the novels of Haruki Murakami, her favorite novelist to write about World War II. The “botchedness” in Murakami takes the form of “turns in the plot ... often achieved unsatisfyingly, by dreams, or by a character deciding to sit in the bottom of a well”; these give the novels “a quixotic dynamism.” Although *The Idiot* is also a quixotically dynamic novel, Selin’s frequent dreams (I counted twenty-nine) are well integrated, and often work in tandem with the disorientation of the college experience and the otherworldly quality of online communication. In a reversal of the normal process in which images and experiences from the previous day are incorporated into dreams, the narration of Selin’s waking state that follows a dream often retains a surrealistic tinge. One period of especially disturbed sleep, for example, coincides with days of constant rain, during which umbrellas become “a sort of visual joke,” and the libraries distribute “plastic bags that said A WET BOOK IS NOT A DEAD DUCK.” A review of a pointless novel shouldn’t require a spoiler alert; if you disagree, consider yourself warned. Nothing (or very little) has changed by the end of *The Idiot*, or at least so the narrator claims. Fall of freshman year has become fall of sophomore year, and after a series of steps in apparently random directions, Selin is back where she started. Again, it’s not that the novel doesn’t have a point, but that its main concern isn’t the progression of plot. Instead, Batuman offers us a youthful encounter with the complexity of language, dreams, and technology, the depiction of a messy beginning. The novel’s ending, then, is another beginning. This echoes a Murakami narrator discussing Soseki’s *The Miner*, an assessment Batuman quotes in n+1: “Nothing in the novel shows he learned anything from these experiences, that his life changed, that he thought deeply now about the meaning of life or started questioning society.” A random walk, then—but an immensely pleasurable one. Very tall, with an unusual face, a Turkish-American girl who grew up in New Jersey, attends Harvard, and aspires to be a writer, Selin is clearly a stand-in for Batuman. Moreover, parts of *The Idiot* replicate almost verbatim sections from essays in *The Possessed* ... Batuman nails the details of mid-1990s college life. Albert Einstein, REM, and Ansel Adams posters, Edward Gorey and Klimt prints abound. We have snoring roommates, fajita night in the cafeteria, meet-ups for frozen yogurt, CARE packages from parents, halogen lamps, black Jersey clothes from the Gap, fake IDs ... *The Idiot* is told in short, largely self-contained segments, a tactic that makes for sharp, well-defined scenes but sometimes undermines the novel’s flow, coherence, and elegance. It also peters out rather unsatisfactorily. But Selin is such good company that we easily forgive any formal lapses. At once a cutting satire of academia, a fresh take on the epistolary novel, a poignant bildungsroman, and compelling travel literature, *The Idiot* is also a touching and spirited portrait of the artist as a hugely appealing young woman. Read Full Review >> ...a hefty, gorgeous, digressive slab of a book ... It lopes along like a highbrow episode of *Louie*, a series of silly, surreal, confident riffs about humiliations, minor and major. It is a rejoinder to the pressure on literature to serve as self-help, to make us empathetic or better informed, to be useful. Here, fiction’s only mandate is to exploit the particular freedom afforded by the form — to coast on the charm and peculiar sensibility of our narrator ... Her instincts are, in general, excellent — she is Selin, more or less — save the odd, unhappy decision to repurpose details, characters, conversations and even whole scenes from her previous book ... for all [the] moments of evasion, there is more oxygen, more life in this book, than in a shelf of its peers. Read Full Review >> There are mica-glints of beauty everywhere in it, the author’s voice eccentric, funny, enormously intelligent ... But Batuman also attempts to make *The Idiot* the kind of novel that tells a story — sort of, anyway, the story of a young woman’s first year at Harvard, and the story isn’t good at all. The effect is half-ruinous, a skilled writer forcing herself into the contours of a weak book. It would be hard to regret reading it; harder still to read it a second time ... the second half of the book, it falls apart. Selin goes to teach English in Hungary, and her account of it is interminable. I kept willing *The Idiot* to lurch forward a year, even a month, to offer a surprise. Instead it marches grimly on, as if in tribute to some forgotten army from the country where it’s set ... In general, in fact, Batuman has no gift whatsoever for character, at least not one that’s evident here, the Svetlanas and Bills and Ferns as blurry in their outlines as your own freshman-year acquaintances probably are to you ... Batuman finds herself trapped between mocking her autobiography and cherishing it ... [an] honorable defeat, its unforgettable spikes of truth embedded in a wasted plot. Read Full Review >> For this reader, though, the book’s pleasures come not from the 400-page, low-and-slow smolder of its central relationship, which can at times feel like nothing more than two repressions circling one another; rather, it is Selin herself. Acutely self-conscious but fiercely intelligent, she consistently renders a strange, mordantly funny and precisely observed world ... While there are memorable scenes — a semi-grotesque child pageant Selin is asked to judge, a bucolic canoe ride with Ivan — the pacing flags [in the second half]. I missed the spark and crackle of campus life, Selin’s surgical deflating of puffed-up professors, the ice-shagged streets of Boston ... Still, Selin’s is a consciousness one does not want to part with; by the end of the book, I felt as if I were in the presence of a strange, slightly detached, utterly brilliant friend. Read Full Review >> However, rather than focusing on any one idiot, this novel (Batuman’s first) investigates the particular idiocy of human ambition. Of youthful mishap. Of the relentless endeavoring to control or predict the course of our lives and identities ... In many ways, though, *The Idiot*, does map onto a prevailing mode in contemporary, of-the-moment fiction. The meanderings and marginality of a character in a large, impersonal, often bewildering order ... the book traffics in a very canny, very funny kind of academic parody ... Batuman, who studied comparative literature, is a great English deployer of a very Russian kind of parabolic storytelling ... Like a Russian parable, Batuman is interested in telling and reiterating the central fact of human inadequacy. Idiocy. But, drawing from a British tradition of novel writing (from Eliot to Austen to Dickens), she is also careful about balancing her judgement with a sympathetic sense of condescension. Read Full Review >>

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