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The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir



Synopsis

The long-awaited memoir by one of Romania's greatest living authors *The Hooligan's Return* is a haunting memoir, vividly re-creating Norman Manea's harrowing childhood in Fascist Romania while providing indelible portraits of Ceausescu's dictatorship and the pre- and post-Communist eras. Manea's observations about his visit in 1997 are intertwined with his reflections on his return to Romania after four years in Transnistria, in the camps to which large numbers of Romanian Jews were transported in 1941. As the narrative utilizes one journey to illuminate the other, Manea's friends and family tell their own stories, and the topic of departure and return proves to be an obsessive constant. As the story of a writer who is anything but militant, a literary man more interested in moral and aesthetic questions than in politics, this compelling and beautifully executed memoir explores questions of identity, exile, and the conflict between life and literature, dream and reality, past and present.

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Customer Reviews

Manea is a Romanian-born novelist [*Black Envelope* (1995)] and essayist (*On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*) whose life and work have been marked by themes of departure, exile, and ambivalence about his past. After a harsh childhood in Transnistria, a concentration camp for Romanian Jews, and a frustrated, tedious adulthood as an engineer within the Communist system, Manea finds writing--and controversy--in middle age, and he emigrates to New York. His memoir is the eloquent story of his return to Romania amid academic controversy and lingering questions about his identity. Familiar Manean literary caricatures travel with him and become vehicles for

understanding the haunted past: the White Clown (representing brutal dictators past, present, and future) and Augustus the Fool, his exiled-artist foil. Manea visits his hometown and his mother's grave and flashes back to his past, but he never finds the catharsis he seeks. "The return did not restore me," he mourns. "I am an embarrassed inhabitant of my own biography." Perhaps true, but his engrossed readers will likely forgive him. Brendan Driscoll Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Slyly disguised as an unsentimental journey back to his native Romania, Norman Manea's fascinating memoir is, among other things, the history of a country; a moving portrait of a family improbably surviving the serial horrors of Hitler, Stalin, and Ceausescu; a meditation on exile and freedom, memory and language, solitude and community; and a thoughtful, beguiling record of the almost incredible events that can transpire in one life, especially if that life is lived in 20th-century Eastern Europe. The Hooligan's Return operates on so many levels--psychological and political, ironic and tragic, moral and philosophical, satirical and elegiac--that finally it eludes all classification and reveals itself as art."--Francine Prose "Romania's greatest living novelist weaves together three journeys, three precise moments in his life, in this subtle, exacting, obsessive and extraordinary memoir that wrenches beauty from pain and transfixes life into art. The Hooligan's Return is a brilliant achievement." --Edward Hirsch "We know when we've come on a work of literature that alters, for the rest of our lives, how we see, how we understand even that which we may have believed we understood before. Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*. The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Chaim Grade's *My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynier*. Ward Number Six. And now *The Hooligan's Return*. I am profoundly grateful for this living, flesh-and-blood, yet unearthly memoir." --Cynthia Ozick

Norman Manea: *The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir*, transl. Angela Jianu, 2003 This memoir presented me with an alternative life of sorts, since it was written by an author two years older than I and born in Suceava, Romania -- birthplace of my father and perhaps his own parents. Norman Manea, the author of several novels in Romanian as well as this memoir, was born in Suceava in 1936 and lived in Romania till he moved to the United States in 1988. He was apparently inspired to write the present book when presented with the prospect of a return visit to Romania in 1997 with the man who had hired him to teach at Bard College, its president, Leon Botstein. This memoir is a deeply (and often painfully) introspective work with many flashbacks and other displacements of time, as well as dream sequences of dialogue with people not (or no longer) physically present. It

makes frequent references to other Romanian authors I will be exploring, most especially to Mihail Sebastian, whose own memoir was titled *Journal: 1935-1944*, and whose own scandalous literary association with the right-wing Nae Ionescu gave birth to Sebastian's "sparkling" essay titled *How I became a Hooligan*. The theme of associations with people of brutally compromised honesty (and bare survivors thereof), and the distrust and air of unreality, and anti-Semitism -- and real danger--engendered thereby, necessarily permeates Manea's memoir. For it has been written by a Jewish Romanian who endured Transnistria, liberation by the Russians, Ceaus'escu's repressive regime, and the gray post-communist era that persisted through the end of the 20th century, where his book ends at May 2, 1997, after a return from the aforementioned visit to his native land, and back "home" in the relative safety (and loneliness) of New York City (where the book began). Finally, this hauntingly beautiful book is presented as a tribute to the Romanian language, in which Norman Manea writes his works, wherever else he may have to be, and he has been blessed with a graceful translation into English for our benefit. I assume he still teaches at Bard College and lives with his wife in New York City.

This is a wonderful, if difficult book. It cronicles the author's life. Norman Manea suffered from both the Holocaust and Communism. Being Jewish, he and his family were deported during the Second World War to a concentration camp set up by Romania's fascist regime (General Ion Antonescu, Hitler's ally) in Transnistria, where several hundred thousand Jews were imprisoned and died in horrible circumstances. Luckily he survived the KZ and returned to Romania. Later on, when he had become a writer, he was declared enemy of the state and a 'hooligan' by Romania's Communists, because he had dared criticize the antisemitic government in an article. (Another fascinating Romanian-Jewish writer, Mihail Sebastian (see his *Jurnal*) was described as a 'hooligan' by antisemits in a literary scandal back in the 30's - the term has deep connotations for Manea). His relationship to his homeland remained troubled even after he left Romania in the 80's, settling down in New York as a professor for literature (he teaches at Bard College). Although he is one of Romania's best writers, his country's literary elite treats him with a certain embarrassment. He can be compared in this respect to Imre Kertesz's relationship with Hungary. I liked this book not only because of all the detailed, multi-faceted and subtle description of these events, but also because it is an honest and selfironical autobiography. Manea is a reluctant autobiographer. My feeling is that he wrote this book out of duty; not to brag about his past, rather to pay tribute to those he loved and to remind the world of the terrible journey he has been through - a very typical journey for Jews and many East Europeans in the 20th century...P.S. If this book is superfluous, then so are the books by

e.g. Anne Frank, Primo Levy and Mihail Sebastian. Good luck in burning them!

Francine Prose's blurb says it all: check it out on the inside cover of this book. THR is a multi-layered memoir that does not always proceed in chronological fashion. This story of a Romanian exile's return to his homeland is more substantial and real than Romanian-born writer Andrei Codrescu (who changed his surname from Perlmutter to "Codrescu," probably to appear more exotic in the US). When Norman Manea fears encountering the staff at the Intercontinental Hotel in Bucharest, he has REAL reason to, unlike the poseur "Codrescu," who likes to fancy himself a revolutionary. In 1992, Manea penned a controversial essay on M. Eliad, a conflicted man whose relations with Romania's ultranational Iron Guard caused him much intrapersonal conflict. Manea also blew the whistle then on the RO community in Chicago where a significant community of IG sympathizers still carry the flame today. In fact, he intimates, there may yet be a connection between the IG/Chicago Legionnaires and the Securitate in RO even today. Dangerous stuff even in these enlightened times some 60+ years later after the changing of the fascist/communistic guard in RO. Debates of this type go on in all eastern European countries, as they begin to sort thru their messy post-fascist/post-communist pasts; combine this with the added and ironical baggage of having many former Party leaders morph into "democratic" leaders. Absurdity never dies. Manea inspires his readers to delve into the works of other RO writers like Cioran, Paul Celan, I. Culianu, Petru Cretia...so Francine Prose sums things up neatly with her observation that "THR operates on so many levels that finally, it eludes all classification." Well said.

I'm half way through this book and all Manea talks about is how he didn't want to leave Romania and how ten years later he doesn't want to return to Romania. And besides that he's trying to be philosophical about it. That's it. Pretty 'un-entertaining'.

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