

King of the Gypsies

Stories

Lenore Myka

Winner of the G. S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction
selected by Lorraine López

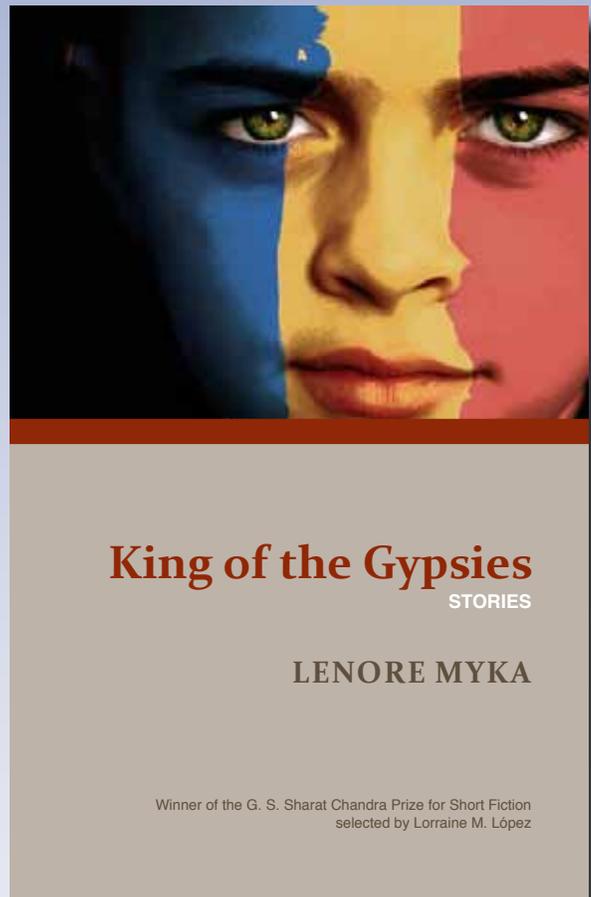
ISBN 978-1886157-99-6 \$15.95, 221 pages, trade paper
BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City,
5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110,
(816)235-2558, www.umkc.edu/bkmk

Interview by Zoë Polando

In King of the Gypsies, you write about how hard it is for your American protagonists to understand or adapt to Romanian culture. As an American yourself, was it difficult for you to write from a Romanian point of view? What was your biggest struggle with this and how did you get into character? As a Peace Corps volunteer, did you experience the out-of-depth feelings that your American protagonists have when trying to work in a completely new culture?

I think that for anyone writing fiction, it's a challenge to write from the perspective of a character who is vastly different from yourself. But this is also why I write fiction: I want to imagine lives unlike my own. To be honest, I didn't find the experience dramatically different from any other time I write fiction, though at one point I anticipated critics who might say that my representation was inaccurate. When I was really struggling with this, a mentor of mine told me this was just another version of the internal critic and encouraged me to "kick the bastards out of the room." After that sage advice, I just tried to keep in mind what I knew about my friends' lives there and what I had observed and experienced as a Peace Corps volunteer living at essentially the same standard as my colleagues and friends. I tried to be empathic but also true to what I inherently felt about day-to-day living in a post-communist country.

The first year I lived in Romania I definitely experienced out-of-depth feelings. I was young at the time, I didn't have many life experiences and the knowledge that comes with them. But after that first year I felt much more integrated. I spoke the language well, had friends, and felt defensive of Romania. It's a fascinating and beautiful place and deserves more international attention. And the culture shock I experienced moving there paled in comparison to the culture shock I felt upon my return to the United States!



As far as I can remember, I was never taught anything about Eastern European countries in school. Why do you think it is important for Americans to understand the history and current events in countries like Romania?

You mean besides the fact that many Americans are grossly undereducated about the world we're citizens of and should probably know more than we do?

I believe the more we learn and understand other cultures, the closer we are to living in a happier world. Maybe that sounds naïve, but the alternative—the lack of understanding—hasn't gotten us anywhere as far as I can tell. Romania and its Eastern European cousins are becoming part of the European Union, and they'll have an impact on international markets, which have a direct impact on American ones. They're being integrated into a global economy and, as is the case with Ukraine, used as pawns in larger international disputes. The status of countries like Romania will have an impact on American national security and welfare over the long term.

And outside of these pragmatic reasons, Romanian history and culture is singular. Romania has, over millennia, been betwixt and between—a gateway to the West and the East. This means Ottoman and eastern influence as well as western, not to mention the more recent impact of the Ceaușescu regime. There are still

arguments about who owns sections of the country. Studying Romanian history and culture might also just teach us about our own—how we identify borders and states, how we decide what belongs to whom, who stays and who leaves.

What titles would you recommend that would give further insight into Romania's history and culture?

When I was a Peace Corps volunteer, there wasn't a lot, at least not in English. In '94 Romania was still newly emerging from having been one of the most impenetrable communist states; little information got out, or in for that matter. As volunteers we read books like *Balkan Ghosts* and *Red Horizons*; books that paint a pretty dark and not always accurate picture of Romania. Because I was intrigued by the challenges surrounding Romania's Roma population, I read Isabel Fonseca's *Bury Me Standing*, which is a wonderful book.

Today, I actually think the best resources for Romanian society and culture aren't history books at all, but the work of artists. Herta Müller, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature not too long ago, is a wonderful novelist. There's also tremendous film coming out by young directors like Cristian Mungiu (*4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*) and Cristi Puiu (*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*). Another RPCV (Returned Peace Corps Volunteer), Sean Cotter, is a translator and academic in Dallas and has been translating Romanian poets; of particular note is Liliana Ursu. And there is Bogdan Suceavă, who wrote a magical novel, *Miruna, a Tale*, that I would highly recommend.

Romanian-born writer Andrei Codrescu should also be mentioned here, his book *The Hole in the Flag* most especially.

You write about such difficult topics as prostitution, homelessness, and, orphaned children, in your stories. How do you, as an author confronting such dark subjects, retain hope that there is some good in the world?

I think there is a misconception that because I write about these dark subjects I must be a dark, depressed, hopeless human being. Once when I was on the telephone with my mother she was talking about my story "Palace Girls" and said, "I did wonder: Are you okay, sweetheart?" Of course, I laughed, what else could I do?

There are two separate people inside me: the human being and the writer. And as a writer I am not really interested in happy endings. It is hard, as a writer of literary fiction in particular, to write a happy ending and still have the story resonate on a deeper and more profound level, not to mention have it be unpredictable. I can really only think of a handful of beloved novels that



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achieve this and only one that was written after the 19th century. How many movies and books end in weddings? But consider what happens after the wedding! That is the really interesting stuff! Rarely do we experience happiness in life that isn't accompanied with some sort of trade-off or complicating factor. Why should this be any different in fiction?

People tend to forget the human experience behind the darkness, which is what I'm really trying to get at in my stories. Maybe this is a result of being desensitized by the news and the abundance of it. Actually, to process news we cannot think of each individual circumstance; it would be too much for us to take on each individual who has suffered during war or famine. I want to consider the individual circumstance, and that's why I did write about some of these darker experiences.

Ultimately my stories are about resilience, and in resilience there is always hope.

A sense of place is an important part of these stories, not just the actual places where the characters are, but the places they instead long for, dream of, idealize from afar, like Stefan, a Romanian boy transplanted to America, who imagines that everything is better back in Romania. How do you understand the relationship between place—real or imaginary—and character?

I don't believe you can have character without place; environment shapes character, and vice-versa. Because so many of these stories have to do with displacement, it seems inevitable to me that the characters would all have an acute sense of their new surroundings and would struggle to figure out where they fit in. In the case of Stefan, his environment is thrust upon him and he fights against it by romanticizing Romania, a place we can assume was no happier for him since he lived in an orphanage there. I think this is a very human response,

especially for children, who tend to be victims of their environments. For the adult characters in the book, this relationship is perhaps more convoluted. The character of Gabriela in “National Cherry Blossom Day” must grapple with conflicting desires—wanting to be with her American husband but not wanting to leave her family and homeland behind. And what happens to your sense of home and the stability it seemingly supplies when external forces impose themselves upon it? I explore this question in “Song of Sleep,” when Lucy’s world is shaken up by the arrival of her parents.

The relationship between character and place is a hot topic for me. Though I grew up outside of Buffalo, NY and it shaped me in significant ways, I never fully felt a part of the community there. Moving away, I idealized it—and occasionally still do. I’ve also discovered that I’ve never fully felt a part of any community in which I’ve lived. So in this way I’m much like my characters, feet forever planted on different shores. I once heard another author say that this forever living outside is necessary in order to be an astute observer of life, and ultimately a writer, and I find some comfort in this idea.

What is the most important impression of Romania that you would like your readers to come away with?

Alas, I think the most important impression I want readers to come away with about Romania cannot be found in my book! I must say that while the book is thematically linked, I don’t necessarily think of it as a collection about Romania. There is a little bit of the muse happening in these stories; they are better representative of my creative process more than anything else. While Romania might have started off as the inspiration, what resulted was something very different than I could have ever predicted.

What people—readers and non-readers alike—should know about Romania is that it is a beautiful and fascinating place. It had much to teach me as an American about the generosity and openness of human beings. I had strangers take me and feed me, give me a place to sleep, and even one time, protect me from danger. I had friends, but also people who treated me like family there. In Romania, I could just knock on people’s doors and have them welcome me in. How often does that happen in the United States? And shouldn’t it, quite honestly, happen more?

Discussion Questions

- 1.) *King of the Gypsies* provides a worm’s eye view into post-communist Romanian society. The stories introduce us to a country still reeling from revolution, where homelessness is rampant, prostitution visible, and child abandonment commonplace. What conceptions or misconceptions did you have about Romania going into this book? How did your misconceptions change? And how do you view Romania now?
- 2.) Woven through these stories is the indomitable character of Irina. We follow her coming-of-age stories through child prostitution, homelessness, and a later return to prostitution. Yet throughout these incredibly difficult experiences, Irina retains her sense of self. Where do you think she finds this resilience?
- 3.) In *King of the Gypsies*, some American characters feel out of their depth in their quest to help Romanians, whether students or orphans or their own adopted Romanian children. What might be the best training or preparation for Peace Corps volunteers and others who seek to help the people of a country that has gone through significant traumatic events?
- 4.) *King of the Gypsies* highlights the deep rifts in Romanian society, from the pervasive racism against the Roma people, to the ingrained sexism that defines the roles of woman. Discuss these rifts and address how Myka’s characters either challenge, accept, or subvert them.
- 5.) Many of Myka’s characters are from a younger generation of Romanians, who were only children when communism fell. How do you think their childhood experiences of growing up in adversity, born out of a desire for liberation, will affect Romania’s future?