

FILIP FLORIAN**Toate bufnitele / All the Owls****Novel, Fiction LTD series, Polirom, 2012, 280 pages****Copyright:** Filip Florian**Translation rights sold to:** All rights available**Book presentation****Polirom's bestseller at the Gaudeamus Book Fair (Bucharest, November 2012).**

All the Owls is the novel of a deep friendship, one that breaks all the usual moulds: the friendship between a rebellious teenager from a small town in the mountains and a man forty-eight years his senior. Their relationship has little to do with any archetype of master and apprentice, for it unfolds under the star of absolute freedom, under the mirage of forests, windswept crags, and the laughter that heals wounds and sufferings. Above all else, at the heart of this friendship is the old man's knowledge of how to talk to owls in the twilight, far from the eyes and ears of other people, using a secret language of dozens of shrieks, whoops and whistles.

The novel spans the period of time from January 2000 to October 2012. The account is in the first person singular, but in two continuously alternating voices. Luci describes how he grows closer to the man from Bucharest, on the one hand, and the adventurous, rebellious childhood of a young tearaway, on the other. In his escapades involving imaginary lost treasures, petty thefts, revenge, girls, and places in the mountain wilderness, the boy is almost always in the company of his dogs and a few close friends. The other voice is Emil's, but he speaks not of the present or the recent past, but of events of long ago, which he records in the pages of a notebook. Containing autobiographical and family stories, his memoirs cover more than half a century, recounting the dramas of the war and the communist period, and relate the thoughts of a man in his sixties and seventies about the world, chance, loneliness, and his peers.

Excerpt from

In the hall it was hot, very hot, but when you came in from outside, out of the frost, what struck you first was the brackish air and only afterwards the heat. Whenever I entered, my nostrils were always one step ahead of my eyes and ears. They would sniff that weak solution of steam, bleach, and seaweed, an odour I had never encountered anywhere else and which never faded. The hall had a mosaic floor and a high ceiling with a brown stain. There were lamps set into the curving walls. Inside, it never occurred to me that the smell must have seeped into the plaster as a signature of the place itself, but I confess that what did cross my mind was that the woman at the ticket counter, a fat woman with thin curly hair, dyed red, who wore flip-flops and a white cotton smock even in the depths of winter, had been infested by that brackish reek. She carried it around in the pores of her skin. She would never be able to get rid of it, not even if she immersed herself in liquid soap, not even if she splashed on a litre of perfume, not even if she scrubbed herself with the brush for scouring the floor. I said the very same thing to the lads, it must have been on our third trip and penultimate visit to the swimming pool of the Hotel Silvana, and Tudi whispered back that he wouldn't mind having a go at scrubbing her melon-sized tits with some sandpaper. We didn't buy tickets, because they were expensive and we had made an honest trade with Nelu Velescu, the boiler man, a neighbour of Nițuș's, who put in a good

word for us with the cashier whenever we washed his car. In December he had bought himself a cherry-red Opel Astra, with seventy thousand kilometres on the clock, and he liked to see it gleaming so that you could see your face in it. Sometimes, in the afternoon, if it wasn't snowing, he would call us and arm us with rags, buckets of hot soapy water, a miniature vacuum cleaner, and a spray for the windows. He would stand over us, giving advice, supervising us. He would put us to work no matter how cold it might be. We granted his wish so that we would get on his good side, so that he would unbar the portal to the swimming pool for us. And the swimming pool, with its blue tiles, its starting blocks at the end of each lane, fifty metres long and twenty-five metres wide, according to Olympic regulations, was not like any weir or frothing mountain whirlpool, even if it was almost certainly filled straight from the Ghindura rill. I have no idea what they did with the stream water, how they filtered it, how they enchanted it, but the magic produced a different kind of water, neither too hot, nor too cold, clear and tranquil, without rocks, sand or rotting wood, of quite a depth, a domesticated, well-groomed water, a water that had learned good manners. To be honest, I wasn't all that crazy about it, although it allowed you to jump in head-first or feet-first, to do a flip, somersault, or corkscrew, it allowed you to gambol, race or leapfrog when there weren't very many other people, and above all it allowed you to play that mad game dreamt up by Sandu, which he called pearl and which was supposed to be like pearl diving in the South Seas: one of us would toss a stone high up in the air and when it dropped into the swimming pool we would dive in to fetch it. Naturally, the winner was the one who fished it out, but at the bottom of the pool we had to grope around like we were nearsighted or rather blind, because the water stung so badly that most of the time we kept our eyes shut. In our underwater skirmishes, as we elbowed and shoved each other, the water had an effect similar to red-hot chilli peppers. Sandu was able to turn the page however suited him, that is, he had but to mention the name of a semi-precious stone, rather than come up with a whole story about jewels and hidden treasure. In short, the game inflamed us like puppies scrapping over a measly bone, and what is more, it always used to annoy somebody, be it a pool attendant, be it a frightened mother, or be it some bloke with a potbelly and principles. It used to be sad when the fat woman from the ticket counter came to make an inspection and threatened never to let us back into the swimming pool ever again. After one of her tongue-lashings, we would turn into little angels: we would sit by the radiator at the edge of the pool and play cards or else we would slowly swim the breaststroke, one behind the other, like frogs. We were so well behaved that we would have amazed even ourselves if we could have looked on from a distance. Whatever we might have whispered about among ourselves didn't matter, given that nobody could hear us. In January and February, lessons at school used to finish before lunch and we would mope around the house for a while, we would let the winter indulge its whims, and then, at around half past five, as night fell, the time of day when the imagination is in full bloom and plans begin to hatch, we would go to the pool. It was in one such moment of inspiration, while we were taking a breather, whispering among ourselves, that the idea about the sauna slowly took shape. We had discovered it by chance the very first evening, as we were walking to the showers along the dimly lit corridor: as we were passing, a door had opened and a blast of heat had hit us, as if from an oven. In the two seconds it took for some puny bloke to slip outside, I caught a glimpse of wooden benches with backrests and a fine mist, like the steam from a cauldron of soup. In that soup, it seemed to me, there had been floating three soft, plump dumplings in dark bathing suits. To Marcel, strangely enough, the bodies prone on the benches had looked like meatballs dusted with flour but yet to be deep-fried, while Nițuș had seen them as chicken legs with fat-speckled skin laid out on a griddle. In any case, we waited for the women to come out and then watched them as they went away. They seemed groggy. They shuffled their slippered feet and occasionally heaved a sigh. Once we were sure that nobody was coming down the corridor, we

stepped across the threshold into the cauldron of soup. I had never experienced such suffocation or such a wilting feeling in my life. Even a crowded bus in summer would have been cool in comparison with that claggy heat. We flopped down wherever the fancy took us and lay there for what might have been an eternity or five minutes, I no longer know how long, and then ran to the pool and dived in, looking not for pearls but relief. As we were about to leave, having wrapped ourselves snugly in our winter coats and pulled our hats down over our ears, Gabi suddenly realised he had forgotten his towel and dashed back to fetch it. We waited for him outside, bickering about whether the moon was full or not, and shortly afterwards he appeared, with a broad smile on his face and the news that the fat woman in the flip-flops and white cotton smock, thinking she was all by herself, had just entered the sauna. We all laughed, in a chorus of six voices. We pictured the scene down to the detail of her bottom sizzling and melting in the steam. Then we wished her hale and farewell, because in the end she was our benefactress and it wasn't fitting that we should speak ill of her like that. Later, that all changed, however. Six weeks is a huge, vast stretch of time, during which we washed Nelu Velescu's car another three times, although the snow did not let up, blizzards raged and the north wind blew. We wormed our way into his confidence, since he was the canny craftsman who tended the main boiler. We wheedled all his secrets out of him, discovering willy-nilly all kinds of odd details, such as how to fire up that huge piece of machinery, how to keep the pressure up, how to air the pipes in the hotel, how to keep the water in the pool at a steady temperature of twenty-seven degrees, and countless other assorted boring information, reeled off by a boring man. But among all those trifles and tedious explanations, he gave away what we were hoping he would give away, namely that the fat woman had a soft spot for him and how to heat the sauna until it was as hot as the boiler of a steam locomotive. The first revelation was a let-down: with her dyed-red hair curled in rollers, the woman who dispensed tickets for the pool was not the stoker's mistress, but merely a married cousin of his, who lived in one of the housing blocks. But the second piece of information fit hand in glove, given it was February and, what with the frosts that had descended upon the town, any extra glove was welcome. We knew that in one corner of that little room where people went to sweat their hearts out there was a square structure as big as a barrel, but what we hadn't suspected was that within the housing there were spiral elements that glowed like the embers of a beech wood fire. And those spirals, as old man Nelu informed us, heated the stones in the sauna to very high temperatures, the same as if they had been kept in a stove for hours and hours. When you poured water on them, it evaporated instantly, turning into a pale mist, but not like the mists that envelop the mountains, rising from the valleys and hollows. When you learn something, it's important to learn it thoroughly, in every detail and nuance, otherwise everything will come to nought. But even if every time we went to the swimming pool we kept a close watch out of the corner of our eye on she-who-must-be-obeyed lest we unwittingly enrage her, even if we swallowed a mass of reproaches and ill humours, there was still one detail that we missed, and namely that, the same as good fortune can spring from the soil or a dry stone, so too can ill fortune spring from an almost deserted swimming pool. From the part opposite the windows, to be precise. It was late February. We had washed the cherry-red Opel for the fourth time the day before and we were playing pearl as usual. We were fighting each other like madmen for a limestone pebble, we were also swearing our lungs out, when all of a sudden a fine rain started to patter down on us, like an autumn drizzle, but without there being any holes in the roof. A brunette with long nails, aged around forty, was standing at the edge of the pool about a metre away from us, one hand on her hip, the other in the air, index finger wagging, sprinkling that rain, a dismal shower whose droplets were meant to convey to us that she had come there to relax, not to get high blood pressure, that she had already told us to pipe down and we hadn't, that her head was now throbbing and we had ruined

all her enjoyment. Then she turned her back on us, like a cloudburst, and stormed off to the ticket booth. To make matters worse, the brunette was not just any brunette, but a nursery school teacher, and not just any nursery school teacher, but the one who taught the middle group at the nursery school by the housing blocks. And one of the pupils in the middle group of that nursery school in that insufferable neighbourhood was none other than the youngest boy of the fat woman in the white smock. It was the end of an epoch. Barking and scowling, as hard-hearted as a sergeant major, the fat woman sent us to the locker room to get dressed and swore that we would never set foot there again, not even if she were run over by a tram. In our town there were no tramlines, tram stations, tramcars, or tram drivers, but none of that mattered. We went to the locker room in silence, our heads bowed, as if we were being sent to the scaffold or off to war. But first we asked a bloke what time it was and he said it was a quarter to eight, which meant it was not long until closing time. We entered the showers and slowly soaped and rinsed ourselves. Then we towelled ourselves without haste and dawdled as we put on our socks, vests, and the rest of our clothes. We bided our time, keeping a sharp ear on every sound and movement from the corridor. Gabi slipped into the sauna like a shadow and swiped the two-litre pitcher. We all took turns piddling in it until it was full to the brim and then Gabi took it back and placed it between the water bucket and that square contraption as big as a barrel, whose housing contained the red-hot spiral elements. Anyway, when it's winter, a person has to wear lots of pullovers and it takes him quite a while to turn them the right side out, to pick all the bits of fluff off them, and to make sure they're not on back to front. We continued to get dressed in silence – after all, we had no reason to hurry – until we heard the door of the sauna creak. It was the brunette with the red nails, looking forward to some relaxation. For a while the silence buzzed deafeningly, as if it were talking to itself, and then we heard a piercing scream followed by a thud. White flip-flops flapped down the corridor, the door creaked once more, and then came the deluge, although not even now was there any hole in the roof. The fat woman was thundering and lightening. She might even have been capable of raining hailstones. And above the stormy blasts there was a dreadful stench of piss. The piss of each and every one of us.

Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth

Filip Florian (b. 16 May 1968, Bucharest) – between 1990-99, he worked as a journalist and editor for the *Cuvintul (The Word)* weekly and then as a correspondent for the Free Europe and Deutsche Welle radio stations. He spent five years in the mountain town of Sinaia writing his first novel *Little Fingers*, which was published to great critical acclaim by Polirom in 2005. Greeted as the work of a distinctive and original new voice, the novel was awarded the *Romania literara (Literary Romania)* magazine Prize for Debut, the Romanian Writers' Union Prize for Best Prose Debut, and the National Union of Employers Prize for Excellence. Together with Matei Florian, his younger brother, Filip Florian published the unusual dialogic novel *The Baiut Alley Lads* (Polirom, 2006), also warmly praised by critics and the reading public alike. In 2007, second editions of both books were printed. *Little Fingers* has been published in Hungary (Magvetö, 2008), Germany (Suhrkamp, 2008), Poland (Czarne, 2008), Spain (Acantilado, 2009) and the USA (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), and will be published in Italy (Fazi), Slovenia (Didakta) and Slovakia (Kalligram). *The Baiut Alley Lads* has been published in Poland (Czarne, 2009), the UK (Plymouth University Press, 2010), Spain (Acantilado), and Bulgaria (Panorama +). *The Days of the King* has been published in Hungary (Magvetö, 2009), and was published in the USA in 2011 (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).