

**LUCIAN DAN TEODOROVICI**

**Matei Brunul / Matei the Brown**

**Novel, "Fiction Ltd." series, Polirom, 2011, 400 pages**

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### **Book presentation**

**National Award for Prose - "Observator cultural" magazine**

**National Award for Prose - "Ziarul de Iasi" newspaper**

**Book of the Year 2011 - "Contrafort" magazine**

**The Public Prize, Romanian Book Market Awards**

*Matei the Brown* is set in the period between 1945 and 1959. The novel's protagonist, Bruno Matei, a Romanian puppeteer of Italian ancestry, is presented from two different perspectives, on two narrative levels. In the first, which unfolds in Jassy, a city in north-east Romania, over the course of the year 1959, he is suffering from partial amnesia following an accident, and is a free man, albeit constantly shadowed by Bojin, the secret policeman assigned to him. A relationship develops between him and the secret policeman, and a series of 'mysteries' regarding Bruno Matei's past life are placed in circulation. As a diversion, the Securitate invents dramatic events in the main character's past, events which obviously never took place, but whose sole purpose is to remould his present, to make him docile and obedient to the new totalitarian order.

The second narrative, equal in length to the first, focuses on Bruno Matei's real past, spent in four communist prisons: the Uranus Penitentiary in Bucharest, the Valea Neagră Peninsula Penal Colony, Galați Penitentiary, and Jassy Penitentiary. The two narratives unfold in parallel, so that the Securitate's diversionary actions are one by one exploded by the often disarmingly innocent story of a man crushed beneath the juggernaut of the social and political changes that swept Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Matei the Brown* is the first purely fictional work to explore the communist prison system in Romanian literature.

### **Excerpt from**

Another five weeks, during which his cellmate was twice replaced, elapsed before he was at last brought to the room where the interrogator was waiting for him. And there, before the man in front of him had time to raise his fists against him once more, Bruno confessed. He confessed briefly, without being asked any question, without even waiting for the interrogator to open his mouth. Yes, he had known from the start that his two students were legionaries. Yes, he had suspected that Octavian, who had been the first to come to him for private lessons, and afterwards his friend Mihai, wanted to use the group in order to spread hostile, counter-revolutionary ideas. Even in his presence, the two had sometimes talked about the Captain's (\*1) ideas, trying to win him and his other two students over to their side. And yes, he too, Bruno Matei, was to a certain extent guilty, as he had not opposed those ideas, but rather, from a desire to hold on to his students, he had allowed them to think that he would be willing to support their line. This would explain the declarations made by the two legionaries, according to

which he himself was the head of the entire organisation, and which had come to his knowledge via his own interrogator. This conclusion was also perhaps justified by the fact that, as he was older and more experienced, he had encouraged them, saying things that were otherwise innocuous, but which, as he had to admit, might also be interpreted differently. So, he was guilty, he acknowledged his own guilt, he begged forgiveness for that guilt. He had unwittingly fostered the idea that there was an organisation, but he could also say in his defence that, after the death of his father, under the pretext that he was in mourning, he himself had put a stop to the group's activity, he had ended the so-called private lessons, precisely because he had grown alarmed at the direction things were taking.

The next morning, after yet another sleepless night, this time due to an impatience he could barely suppress, Bruno stood trembling in front of the door until it opened and the warder stepped into the cell. He let them put the blinkers on him without asking any questions, even though his first cellmate, the one from Tirgoviste, had been removed from the cell without being blindfolded. And not even when he heard the door to the latrine did he lose hope, thinking that perhaps this was standard procedure, that perhaps he would have to sign various documents, that perhaps the formalities of his release would last half a day, or all day, and so it was preferable that he should relieve himself beforehand.

When he heard the bolt of the cell door he realised that things were taking a different course than they had in the case of his erstwhile cellmate. But during the days that followed he did not lose hope completely, especially since nobody came to fetch him to the interrogation room. After a few weeks, he even managed to convince himself that the investigation was proceeding with difficulty in his case, probably because they had to gather more evidence, and a mere declaration was not enough. At first, he had been worried on account of this presumed evidence gathering, insofar as it was possible that the investigators might get wind of some falsehood. But he quickly remembered that his two former students had also confessed the same thing, at least that was what he had been told, and this quelled his anxiety, allowing him to cling to a hope.

This hope, albeit one that grew increasingly slender, gave him strength throughout the summer of 1949 and for the whole of the autumn that followed. Each day elapsed in exactly the same way. Reveille was at five o'clock in the morning. Seated on the stool or standing up, facing the peephole. Then the door would open and he and his cellmate would turn to face the wall. They would stand with their backs to the warder. They would be taken to the toilet. They would be brought back from the toilet. Face the peephole. The door. Face the wall. The first ration of food: a piece of bread and boiled beetroot juice. Hours passed sitting on the stool or standing up, facing the peephole. And finally the door would open once more. Face the wall. The second ration of food: cabbage juice, which he had not been able to stomach during the first days, the rancid stench had made him ill, but he had grown used to it in time. A few bits of pearl barley floated in the so-called soup. Then more hours spent sitting on the stool or standing up, facing the peephole. Again the door. Again face the wall. The third ration of food. The same cabbage juice. From time to time, instead of pearl barley, a few peas. Face the peephole. The door. Face the wall. The toilet. Bedtime at ten o'clock. Facing the door, hands in view, on top of the blanket. From time to time, the door would open for some other reason. Once a week, sometimes more seldom, they would be taken outside for half an hour, into the fenced enclosure. Otherwise, over the course of the summer and the autumn, the door opened only when a cellmate was taken away permanently and another took his place. Days that elapsed in the same way, over the weeks, the months. But during all this time there was not one day when he did not think that

eventually, sometime soon, perhaps when he was least expecting it, the door would open for some other reason. For some completely different reason.

When the frost came, which would have been enough in itself, for rare were the moments when the two men stopped shivering, when the stools on which they sat stopped clattering on the floor in time with their shivering, it put an end to Bruno's rash thoughts once and for all. It was not only the torture of the cold, not only the long moments in the cell when he blew warm, warmish, almost cold breath into his palms, onto his shoulders, sometimes onto his toes, pulling his feet up to his mouth, that exhausted his hopes.

Sometime in early December, the warder roused him from his bed at one o'clock in the morning. And Bruno's first nocturnal interrogation, although it did not conclude with a beating or any physical pain – an interrogation whose sole purpose was to introduce his new interrogator: a tall, broad-backed man of around forty, whose eyebrows joined together above his nose – put an end not only to his dreams and his expectations, but also his naivety, which, in various ways, had succoured him thitherto. Amid grammatical errors, vulgar words and menacing chortles, he discovered from the new interrogator that the declaration he had made in spring was good, useful, even interesting, but not nearly sufficient. That declaration was a start, he told him, but it was a start that must continue with 'textbook' confessions, and in those confessions he, the interrogator, who was ultimately a kind of priest, was expecting to hear the lost sheep of the flock, as he put it, "bleating about Patrascanu"(\*2) to hear him "bleating about the group of damned legionaries" that he, the sheep, and nobody else had trained. And having said that, the new interrogator laughed, he told him that he could go back to living in clover the same as he had for the last few months, but that he should be prepared, because that night was "only the beginning," and there would be others to come, and then yet others, until he yanked the very last word from his gob, as he wasn't so daft as to waste his nights like that without getting anything in return.

And the promised nights were not long in arriving. And apart from the grammatical errors and the swearwords, along with those nights there came different kinds of torture, which made Bruno look back on the other interrogations almost with nostalgia. The previous beatings and kickings, as he was to learn in the winter of '49 and '50, had not been nearly as painful as these new tortures.

During the first series of the promised nights, they beat the soles of his shod feet with a crowbar. And when the crowbar ceased to thrash his heels and toes, when he imagined that it was over and managed to staunch his tears, Bruno was lifted to his feet and made to run from one wall of the room to the other. Twenty times. Thirty times. Forty times. And as he ran the torture proved to be crueller even than the blows from the crowbar. Afterwards, once he was back in his cell, laid on the bed, the frost continued the work begun by the interrogator, transmitting the pain from his feet to his throat, and thence all over his body, a pain that was like a snake coiling around his organs, biting them, rending them, crushing his liver into his lungs, his lungs into his heart, his heart into his spleen, until Bruno felt that all his innards had merged into one, huge organ, burning inside him, suffocating him.

But the interrogator was still not satisfied. The night between the first and the second of January Bruno spent in the torture chamber, suspended by his arms from a kind of coat hook, positioned very high up the wall. Hands bound, feet dangling above the floor. In the first few moments, after the interrogator left the room, he had had the strength to picture how he had spent his New Year's Eve, clinking a glass with the family, then going into the larder, taking a cured ham from a hook, abruptly coming to a halt, thrilling to the pleasure of the idea that had just struck him,

returning to the dining room and telling the rest of the family how he intended to punish those bandits thenceforth, by suspending them from a hook like ham shanks, being congratulated, perhaps even receiving a warm kiss from his wife, clinking another glass, then another, then another, and finally going to bed contented. The first few moments had been bearable. So much so that Bruno had been able to conjure up this theatrical performance in his mind, with the interrogator's house as the stage set. But after half an hour, perhaps even less, his desperate attempts to touch the floor with his feet began to strain the bones in his arms, and the snake that on other nights had rent his vitals moved to his shoulders, entered his brain through his neck and nestled there, devouring not his body, but his mind, shooting venomous darts into his eyes, shoulders and nape, maddening him, consuming him. And when at last the interrogator unbound him, summoning two warders to haul the almost unconscious Bruno back to his cell, all his thoughts, terrified by the snake that had made its nest inside his cranium, huddled up in a recess of his mind, a single nook, a single all-encompassing thought, which cried out to him that he should confess to anything, to absolutely anything, only to escape.

And perhaps that thought, which the snake had pursued through the recesses of his mind on so many other nights, would in the end have placed the final confession in his mouth, would have spoken about the connections between his legionary organisation and the Patrascanu family, had not his former interrogator, rather than the brute, inexplicably appeared in his cell at the beginning of February. This time, Bruno looked on him as an old friend. And when he asked him to bring his declaration up to date; to confess to having had Iron Guard sympathies even from his early youth, later augmented by the fascist sympathies he had become contaminated with in Italy; also to admit to the fact that he was the originator and head of the counterrevolutionary group, as not only the two legionaries adamantly claimed, but also in the meantime his other two former students, Bruno nodded his head, confirming that this was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the shameful truth. And he whispered that he regretted it. With all his soul he regretted his errors. Then he asked the interrogator to dictate his new declaration, for his mind was weary, his memory was weary. He would write what was dictated to him. He would write it and sign it without hesitation.

On the morning of 17 March 1950, when he was taken from his cell in the Uranus Penitentiary and led to the van that would transport him to court, Bruno Matei was no longer able to feel any sense of relief. He had left his naivety behind in the interrogation room, clinging to the crowbar that had crushed the soles of his feet, hanging from the hook that had elongated his arms. And so, on the way to the court, his mind no longer conjured up any theatre performance. In his mind there was no longer any room for a stage. There was not even room for so much as a crumb of curiosity about a future which, at the most, held in store a change of cell.

(\*1) Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (1899-1938), leader of the fascist 'Legion of the Archangel Michael', also known as the Iron Guard.

(\*2) Lucretiu Patrascanu (1900-1954), former Romanian communist leader, who was purged, arrested in 1948, imprisoned, interrogated, subjected to a show trial, and finally shot.

**Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth**

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Publishing House, Jassy. He has contributed prose, drama, and articles to various cultural magazines in Romania and abroad, including "Lampa" (Warsaw), "Magyar Lettre Internationale" (Budapest), "The Guardian" (London), "Absinthe: New European Writing" (U.S.A.) etc. Between 2005 and 2008 (7 seasons) he was a scriptwriter for the Animated Planet Show, broadcast by the Antena 1 television channel in Romania, and has written screenplays for the feature-length film adaptations of *Our Circus Presents...*, *I'm a Communist Bidy* and *Lindenfeld*, which were financed by the Romanian National Centre of Cinematography. Published volumes: *Cu putin timp inaintea coboririi extraterestrilor printre noi* (*Shortly before the Extraterrestrials Descended Among us*), novel, Polirom, Jassy, 2005; *Lumea vazuta printr-o gaura de marimea unei tigari marijuana* (*The World Seen through a Hole the Width of a Spliff*), short stories, Constantin Brancusi Foundation Press, 2000; *Circul nostru va prezinta: (Our Circus Presents...)*, novel, Polirom, 2002/2007; *Atunci i-am ars doua palme* (*Then I Clouted Him Twice*), short stories, Polirom, 2004; *Celelalte povesti de dragoste* (*The Other Love Stories*), novel, Polirom, 2009. The collection of short stories *Then I Clouted Him Twice* has been published in Germany (Pop Verlag, Ludwigsburg, 2009). The novel *Our Circus Presents...* has been translated into English (Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), Hungarian (Cirkuszunk bemutatja:, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2009) and Italy (Aisara Edizioni, 2011), and is due to be published in Spain (El Nadir), Bulgaria (Paradox Publishing) and Egypt (Sphinx Publishing). The novel *The Other Love Stories* is also forthcoming in Italy (Aisara Edizioni). Website: [www.teodorovici.ro](http://www.teodorovici.ro).